FORGOTTEN REALMS

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SCREAM OF STONE

The Watercourse Trilogy Book III



Forgotten Realms

Watercourse, Scream of Stone

By Philip Athan

THE STORY THUS FAR

With construction of the canal well under way, all eyes point to Innarlith and to the laconic genius Ivar Devorast. Devorast, more concerned with the deed itself, pays too little attention to the forces aligning against him. All he wants to do is dig a canal, but instead he's had to defend himself against everyone from the Red Wizards of Thay and the Zhentarim to Phyrea, a woman who loves him so much that she wants nothing more than to see him destroyed.

Still haunted by the ghosts of her family's country estate, Phyrea slips ever deeper into madness, clinging to her sanity by the thinnest of threads.

The genasi senator Pristoleph set his sights on the Palace of Many Towers, but he paused along the way to steal Phyrea from her arranged marriage to Willem Korvan.

Willem, heartbroken and confused, sought solace with his mentor, the Red Wizard Marek Rymiit. But Marek has more planned for Willem than just a marriage to the master builder's daughter. Willem, who has done nothing but follow orders, has been transformed by Marek Rymiit into an undead creature, a creature designed to do only one thing: kill.

1

1 Hammer, the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR) Second Quarter, Innarlith

A sound at his bedchamber door woke the master builder. Eyes still closed, head heavy with sleep, he rolled over and called out, "Yes ... what is it?"

No answer, and he could feel himself starting to move from the confusion of interrupted sleep to the annoyance of being ignored by his own servants. It couldn't have been anyone but the upstairs maid, but she would have answered. She would have opened the door and walked in. But she had never done that before. No one had ever thought to roust him from a dead sleep in the middle of the night.

He sighed and rubbed his face with sleep-weak hands and thought he must have been dreaming. He hadn't heard—

Tap.

His breath caught in his throat. The sound was unmistakable. It still echoed in his ears. Then came the scraping, ragged nails dragged down the length of the heavy oak door.

Could it be one of the dogs? Inthelph thought, but no, it couldn't be.

The scraping stopped, and again Inthelph thought he might have dreamed the sound, but it was less a thought and more a hope.
Tap.
Scratch.
Louder, but shorter, as though the claws sank deeper into the wood. He imagined the deep furrows that must have been cut into his door.
His hands shook, and he clutched at his bedclothes.
There were guards in his house, and the staff. No one who meant him any harm could have gotten as far as his bedroom door. It was why he'd never bothered to have a lock installed. Anyone who could get as far as his door was surely—
His door was not locked.
The tap came again, but louder, the tips of hard, heavy talons digging into the wood—then the scratching, louder, more insistent.
The master builder reached for the drawer in his bedside table. He had a dagger there, the blade enchanted so that even he would seem a formidable fighter with it in his hand. The drawer squeaked on its tracks and clunked open so loudly Inthelph winced. He fumbled for the knife, making even more noise, then there was the tap again, a knock, a thud, scratching.
"I have a knife," Inthelph said, even though his probing fingers hadn't yet found the blade.
The scratching stopped. Inthelph's fingers closed on the dagger's handle and he drew it out of the drawer. He sat up in his high, soft feather bed, holding the dagger in front of him in a shaking hand. His mouth was dry, but he tried to swallow anyway. Pain and fear made him whimper, and the whimper made a cold sweat break out on his forehead and between his legs.
"For the love of... for goodness's sake, who is it? What do you-?"
"Inthel—" a voice from beyond the door interrupted.
The voice was familiar. At first he thought it was Willem Korvan, but it couldn't be. The voice was raspy and weak—an old man's voice.
The scratching noise came again, and Inthelph thought
he detected a trace of desperation in the sound of the claws on the door.
"Willem?" he said, but it couldn't be.
"Inthelph. Help me."
It was Willem. His voice was weak, barely above a whisper, but it was Willem Korvan.
Inthelph slipped out from under the covers and dropped to the floor. The chamber was cool and damp, the fire having long since burned to smoldering orange embers in the untended fireplace. Where was the maid?
"Willem?" the master builder called out, the dagger still in his hand,

but largely forgotten. "Are you injured, my boy?"
No answer, but Inthelph thought he could hear a scuffling of feet in the corridor beyond. He sensed hesitation.
"Willem?"
The door handle turned. Well-oiled and polished, it made no sound, but caught the dim orange light from the spent fire.
The master builder rubbed his eyes and stood. He stepped away from the bed, closer to the door, but still held the dagger in front of him. He squinted in the darkness and cast about for a candle. He'd never had to light one himself—where was the upstairs maid?—and he wasn't quite sure where they were kept. Anyway, he had no flint and steel.
He tried to swallow, but his throat hurt. He coughed. Spittle dripped onto his chin, but he didn't have the strength to wipe it away. He shook in more than his hands, his whole body reacting to the cold and the fear.
"Help me," Willem whispered from the darkness behind the door, which had come open a crack.
The fear began to diminish, and the master builder took a step closer to the door. Willem was injured, that much was plain in his voice, but Inthelph had nothing to fear from the young senator who had been his protege.
"Willem, I—" Inthelph said, stopping short when the door opened and Willem Korvan stepped out of the darkness of the unlit corridor.
"Willem," Inthelph whispered, "what's happened?"
Willem stepped in, his knee almost giving out under his weight. What clothes he wore were dirty, tattered rags. Gore had soaked into most of them, and Inthelph was hit by the overwhelming stench of dried blood. Inthelph lifted one foot to step forward, but he couldn't. He stood his ground, the dagger in front of his chest.
Willem took a step closer, then another. His head sat to one side on a neck that seemed incapable of supporting the weight. When he walked his knees didn't bend. Inthelph's eyes grew more accustomed to the dark, and he stepped closer to see Willem's face.
Inthelph gasped in a breath and held it.
Willem's lips had curled over his blackened gums, which in turn had receded off of teeth that were yellow and cracked. One of his eyes had rolled off to one side, the other locked on Inthelph and burned with a cold fire that made the master builder shiver. The smell washed over him. The cloying aroma of exotic spices mixed with the stench of rotting flesh. Willem reeked of the grave.
"What's happened to you?" the master builder whispered.
Willem reached out and batted the dagger from the old man's hand. The blade cartwheeled across the room and came to rest in a puff of

orange sparks on the floor of the fireplace. Inthelph's hand went numb, and when he tried to bend his fingers he heard a popping noise and a dull shot of pain arced up his arm. He hissed.
"Marek Rymiit," Willem growled.
"Oh, no, Willem."
Willem hit him in the chest so hard that purple and red lights flickered in Inthelph's eyes. He felt the contents of his lungs pass his lips, and when he tried to inhale, it was as though the weight of the entire city had been laid on
his chest. Staggered, he tried stepping back but fell on his behind in an ungainly and embarrassing way.
Try as he might to speak, the master builder could only gasp for air that refused to enter his collapsed lungs. Willem stepped over him and crouched, his knees snapping like dried twigs.
"Marek Rymiit," the thing that had once been his most promising protege said again. His breath smelled of maggots and saffron. "Hate."
Willem reached down and Inthelph tried to kick him. It was a feeble, comedic attempt to fight back, but Willem didn't laugh. Hard, dry fingers closed around the master builder's calf and squeezed so hard Inthelph felt cold talons puncture his skin.
Inthelph's lips moved but he couldn't speak. He wanted to ask what Marek Rymiit had done to Willem. He wanted to know why the Thayan wizard would want him dead, and why he would send Willem Korvan to do it.
Or was it Willem Korvan? If it was, the promising young senator the master builder knew was dead.
The thing pulled on his leg and the pain rumbled through the master builder's body like a thunderstorm raging across a summer plain. When the Shockwave reached his head he reeled and almost fainted.
He wished he had.
The sensation of his leg coming away at the knee, the stretching and tearing of tendons, the grind of bone on bone, the ruin of flesh made his chest convulse and his vision narrow until all he could see was Willem's ruined face.
His own foot hit him in the mouth. Willem drew the leg up and smashed it down again. Inthelph's jaw cracked and one of his eyes went blind. His head vibrated and he felt pressure build and build until he was certain his skull would burst from within.
"I'm..." Willem whispered from his dry, dead mouth, "so... so sorry."
It was the last thing Inthelph heard. When his skull cracked in two he was already unconscious. When his own foot came down again and pulped his brain, he was dead.
2 _,_
4 Hammer, the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR) The Thayan Enclave,

Innarlith

Iristoleph looked over Marek Rymiit's shoulder as they both sat. The thing that stood in the corner shifted its weight from foot to foot. It was a man, or at least it used to be. Marek turned his head ever so slightly to one side, following Pristoleph's gaze. Their eyes met and the Thayan smiled.

"Please don't mind him," Marek said. "He isn't listening and only understands what I tell him to understand."

"You feel you need a bodyguard to meet with me?" Pristoleph replied. "And I thought we were friends."

Marek twitched a little at the sarcasm, and Pristoleph smiled at him. The thing in the corner didn't respond in any way, and Pristoleph wondered if Marek was actually telling the truth. It didn't seem as though the thing was aware of their presence at all. It had a black leather hood over its head, tied tightly around the neck with a length of rope, so it couldn't see them. The fact that it was dead was obvious from its demeanor and its smell.

"You get used to it," Marek commented, and not for the first time Pristoleph wondered if the Thayan could read his mind.

"The dockworkers seem to have," Pristoleph said, drawing them to the matter at hand.

"It warms my heart to know that I have been of service to you, and that I have been of service to my adopted home."

Pristoleph spared the Thayan another smile, just to show that he didn't believe a word of it.

"Is there anything at all I can get for you?" Marek asked. "A drink, perhaps? Some food?"

"No, thank you," replied Pristoleph. He wasn't hungry, and couldn't have eaten in the presence of the animated corpse anyway. He nodded at the thing in the corner. "Is this something you want to show me? Something for the docks?"

"Oh, no, no," Marek said, once again glancing back over his shoulder. "This one is special. This one I'm keeping for myself."

"But you wanted me to see it."

Marek looked him in the eye, and Pristoleph held his gaze. He had been sized up before. Pristoleph could pass for human easily enough, but not everyone he encountered failed to notice at least something otherworldly about him. He sat there patiently and waited for a reply.

"I'm showing off again, aren't I?" the Thayan said with a wide, but self-conscious grin. "I hope that the workers I've been providing thus far have been of service to you on the docks. If you are less than satisfied with any of the services I've provided you, I hope you'll give me an opportunity to rectify the situation."

"The zombies work slowly but steadily," Pristoleph said. "The men

have gotten used to them. Even the captains have stopped complaining."

Pristoleph, with Marek's help, had insinuated himself into the quay, taking advantage of the chronic dissatisfaction of the dockworkers to seize control of everything that came in and out of the city through the ports.

"You require additional hands?" the wizard asked.

"Twenty," replied Pristoleph, "to serve the caravans at the southern gate."

"The southern gate?"

"I've been in contact with parties to the south," Pristoleph said. "I will be bringing various exotic and valuable trade goods up from the Shaar."

Marek nodded and smiled again. Pristoleph didn't elaborate any further. The Thayan didn't need to know

about the wemics. The strange creatures, like lions with the souls of barbarians, were a temperamental lot, but Pristoleph could see the potential for powerful allies.

"Twenty of the dearly departed ..." Marek mused. "I see no problem with that, but we will have to discuss a new rate."

Pristoleph raised an eyebrow.

"The canal, you know," the Thayan said. "Demand has risen sharply."

Pristoleph shrugged and said, "I'm sure we won't allow a few gold coins here or there to come between us."

The Thayan dipped forward in a mock bow and they both laughed. Pristoleph looked away, not wanting to watch the jiggling girth of the rotund wizard shake with his girlish cackling. Perhaps sensing Pristoleph's discomfort, Marek stopped laughing.

"I must say, my dear Senator Pristoleph, that you've come here this evening for more than another score of zombies to unload crates."

"Weapons," Pristoleph said, and Marek raised his eyebrows, waiting for him to go on. "I require enchanted weapons. Any variety will do, but I've been asked for pole-arms of various descriptions."

"Ah," Marek breathed. "Of course, Senator. Anything you like."

Pristoleph looked at the undead thing still shifting from foot to foot in the corner.

"Almost anything," the Thayan joked. "You know you have my loyalty. I know I don't have to remind you of that."

"Of course you don't," Pristoleph replied, still looking at the undead thing. "I pay you well enough for it."

He didn't look at the Thayan, so he didn't get a sense of his reaction to that. All at once, though, a thought came to him. Marek Rymiit was more than a merchant, a trader in magic. He might have sworn his loyalty to Pristoleph, but Pristoleph knew he'd done the same to

Salatis and others. Marek Rymiit was merchant enough to know that sometimes he had to make his own customers, make his own marketplace. If the leadership of Innarlith was kept in a constant state of flux, with faction fighting faction and one would-be ransar after another stepping up to assume control of the city-state ... Marek Rymiit would always have a market for his Thayan magic items.

"I don't need your undying loyalty, Master Rymiit," Pristoleph said. "I have gold, and you have magic. That's all either of us needs to know."

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6 Hammer, the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR) The Canal Site

They had no idea what they were doing. Even from the distance of the viewing stand, Surero could see that. The more elaborate of the scaffolds had been dismantled and never fully rebuilt. Mounds of dirt had been formed too close to the edge of the trench and the rain caused mudslides—one after another. Surero could see a pile of broken tools, and a group of workers sat in a circle betting copper coins on knucklebones. The men who were digging dug slowly. The men who cut stone cut them crooked.

But it was the smokepowder that made his skin crawl.

Surero closed his eyes and rubbed his face. The press of the crowd around him made him sweat. He could feel their anticipation, at once heavy and electric in the air. Nervous giggles mingled with impatient whispers, and Surero was tempted to cover his ears.

He shifted his feet, instinctively scanning for a way out, and the wood under his boots creaked from the combined weight of the people who had come to see the greatest undertaking Surero had ever heard of destroyed by incompetence. Devorast's great dream had been stolen from him and given like a gift in colored paper and red ribbon to two men who couldn't begin to fathom its intricacies.

After the disappearance of Willem Korvan, the ransar had appointed Senator Horemkensi to complete the canal. If Horemkensi had any experience in the construction trades, any sense of the scale and requirements of the project, he might have had a chance. But the senator was nothing more than a dandy. Surero had made inquiries both discreet and overt, and all he could find out about the man was that he was the nineteenth in his line to hold his family's seat on the senate and that he enjoyed the social aspect of his position but wasn't much interested in the work itself. Surero had heard that Horemkensi spent less than one day in twenty at the canal site.

"Is that them?" a woman asked, and Surero's attention was pulled back to the disgraceful scene before him.

Three men pulled a cart loaded with small wooded kegs. Surero winced. The kegs had been the last of Surero's contribution to the canal. Packed more tightly than it could be in a sack, the

smokepowder was more effective. They were too big for the holes he'd watched them dig, and there was a pile of unfinished lumber too close by. He'd thought—he'd hoped, at least—that they would move the lumber before setting the smokepowder, but the cart clattered to a stop at the edge of the row of holes.

"Is it safe here?" a man in a silk robe, his eyes lined with kohl and his too-soft hands wrapped in a fur muff, asked the pale woman next to him.

The woman shrugged and Surero shook his head. They both looked at the alchemist, obviously interested to hear more, but Surero could only swallow and grimace. He turned away from them and watched the workers—bored, tired, and dirty—unload the cart. They seemed careful enough with the kegs of smokepowder. They must have seen them explode before, but of course they had no idea how and where to place them.

Surero made a series of fast calculations that calmed his racing pulse for at least a dozen heartbeats. The viewing stand, set up on a hill overlooking the enormous trench,

was far enough away so that even if the effects of the badly-placed smokepowder kegs were worse than Surero feared, the crowd of spectators would not be killed.

Which was more than could be said for at least two dozen workers.

"Are they undead?" another woman asked. "They look normal enough to me, though they could bathe, couldn't they?"

Surero took a deep breath and held it. Word of the zombie workers had trickled into Innarlith. Rumors turned into an open secret and then a simmering debate. Everyone seemed to have an opinion on the use of animated corpses for manual labor, but no one was willing to take a stand either way. The only concession Surero was conscious of was that the zombies were kept away from the viewing stand. He could tell that a good portion of the spectators were disappointed by that. They came to see death in all its forms.

The men began to drop the kegs into the too-shallow holes, and Surero knew the people who had come to the viewing stand that day would see more death and destruction than they'd bargained for. He considered trying to do something, but he felt paralyzed. His legs refused to carry him off the wooden steps of the viewing stand. He couldn't draw in a breath deep enough to shout a warning. He wasn't sure if his inaction came from fear or resignation. He didn't want to draw attention to himself. Not with Devorast gone and Marek Rymiit still ensconced in Innarlan society. He didn't know how much tolerance anyone might have for him. He brewed beer and was good at it. He made a reasonable living. He tried to forget the canal, but he couldn't. He tried to stay away from it, but he'd made the trip to the

viewing stand in the overcrowded coaches with the rest of the impotent onlookers time and again, every time left horrified by what he saw, every time more aware of how much farther away from Devorast's careful attention to detail Horemkensi had allowed things to get.

Even his considerable skill as an alchemist wasn't enough to attract Horemkensi's attention to Surero. He'd been replaced by Horemkensi's own man, an alchemist who had early on thrown in his lot with the Thayan. The alchemist's name was Harkhuf, and when Surero had first encountered him some years before, he was nothing but a minor seller of even more minor potions—healing draughts and snake oils—to the tradesmen of the Third Quarter. Surero had often joked that Harkhuf's greatest achievement as an alchemist was when he stained his fingers green—an accident that had left him permanently marked but otherwise unharmed. Harkhuf wasn't even good enough at his trade to have blown his fingers off, which is what would have happened if the concoction had done what he was hoping it would do.

And that was the man Horemkensi trusted to place Surero's smokepowder. No wonder the crowds had grown bigger and more bloodthirsty.

Someone shouted orders. Surero didn't recognize his voice. It wasn't Harkhuf. Surero briefly held out hope that one of the foremen—one of the men he'd trained himself— had realized that the holes were too shallow and was putting a stop to it, but that wasn't the case. The smokepowder had been placed and the man was simply warning the workers to step back as he lit the fuse.

Surero bobbed from side to side to see around the heads of the people in front of him. He watched the workers walk too slowly away from the holes. He couldn't see or hear the fuse from where he stood, and again all he could do was hope that it hadn't yet been lit. The men stopped far too short of the safe margin Surero had worked out in his head.

The alchemist sucked in a breath and held it. The dandy with the fur muff looked at him with wide, expectant eyes, and Surero turned away from him. He thought again that he should scream out a warning, but he knew it would do no good. If the fuse was already lit, it was too late. If it

wasn't, his would have only been one more voice from the viewing stand—a sound all the canal builders had long since learned to ignore.

Before he could decide which god to pray to that he was wrong, the first of the kegs erupted in a rumble. The hiss of dirt and rocks in the air masked the excited gasps and nervous laughs of the spectators. The next went off, followed immediately by the third. Surero kept his eyes glued to the last in the line, the one closest to the group of workers

and their cart.
Too late the men realized they were too close. They must have instinctively gauged the size of the previous explosions and matched that to the distance they stood from the last hole. They turned and started to run. When the last keg exploded, a wave of dirt and loose stones, broken by the force of the explosion, tore into them. They were lost in the earthy brown cloud, their screams barely audible over the deafening thunder of the blast.
The crowd at the viewing stand held its breath, then sighed as one, disappointed that the very cloud that caused the bloody deaths of the innocent men blocked their view of the carnage. They couldn't see stones driven through flesh and bone to explode out of dying bodies in a shower of blood.
One woman had the audacity to scream. The sound was theatrical and insincere, and Surero wondered how long she'd practiced it. He heard a man laugh, and the gorge rose in his throat. He closed his eyes and turned away, bumping into someone. He was shoved and almost tripped, scolded and berated, as he pushed his way off the viewing stand. Surero didn't turn to see the dead men that littered the edge of the great trench. He pressed his hands tightly over his ears to block out the sound of the people laughing and talking in excited, loud whispers. He fled not only from the bloodshed and stupidity, but from the dense air of satisfaction that hung over the viewing stand.
4
6 Hammer, the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR) Pristal Towers, Innarlith
The woman sat on the floor, her legs splayed under her, a simple silk dressing gown pooled around her. She wept, tears streaming down her face, her muted sobs echoing in Phyrea's head. The woman, made of violet light, didn't look at Phyrea, didn't seem to notice her at all.
Her baby died, the old woman said, her voice coming from nowhere.
"I know," Phyrea whispered. "I'm so sorry."
She got no response to that. The woman continued to cry, and Phyrea knew she had been crying for a long time, for years, even decades, and that she would never stop. The world would end to the sound of her despair.
Phyrea took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She thought about taking a sip of the wine she'd poured herself, but she couldn't will her hand to pick up the tallglass. The sound of the door opening behind her didn't startle her. She knew who it was.
"Phyrea?" Pristoleph whispered. "Do you sleep, my love?"
Her chest tightened. A wave of sadness always washed over her when he called her that. She felt a tear well up in the corner of her right eye, but it didn't fall. It hung there as if waiting for something.

There's no reason to be like her, the old woman whispered in her head.
"Phyrea?" Pristoleph whispered in her ear.
She reached a hand up and touched his face. She hadn't realized he'd come so close. He sighed when her palm met the too-hot skin of his cheek. She had stopped being surprised by how hot he felt, as though he suffered from a perpetual fever. She'd asked him about it many times and
he'd avoided the subject skillfully at first, then bluntly, and finally she stopped asking.
"Were you sleeping?" he asked, his lips brushing her ear.
She shook her head just enough to tell him she wasn't, but not enough to brush him off. Still he pulled away. The ghost's sobbing continued unabated, so Phyrea didn't open her eyes. She didn't like to see Pristoleph and the ghosts at the same time. She didn't want them to belong together.
He sat next to her on the silk-upholstered Zakharan divan. His weight made her lean toward him, and she ended up pressed against his shoulder. She sighed, surprising herself with the sound of it, as though she had already resigned herself to the reality of what he'd come to tell her, though she had no idea what that might be. He stiffened, and in response all her fears washed away until she was left feeling limp and exhausted.
"Your father is dead," Pristoleph told her. "I'm sorry."
Phyrea took in a deep breath and let it out slowly.
"He was murdered," Pristoleph went on.
Phyrea opened her eyes and the woman was still there, still crying, but making no sound.
He won't be coming with us, the man with the Z-shaped scar on his face said from somewhere high above her. You won't see him again. He was killed for no reason, and in the end he didn't want to live.
"Shut up," Phyrea said, her voice squeaking in her tight throat.
"Phyrea, I—" Pristoleph started.
"No," she whispered, silencing him.
Movement to her right caught her attention and she glanced over to see the little girl standing next to the sideboard, her hand poised over a crystal vase in which sat one yellow rose—her father's favorite flower.
"What kind of man has a favorite flower?" she whispered.
Pristoleph didn't answer.
"What was the point?" she asked, her voice louder. "Politics, probably," Pristoleph said. "Coin, favors... an old grudge."
The little girl was angry and she swatted at the vase. It fell from the side table and shattered on the marble floor. Pristoleph jumped,

startled, but Phyrea didn't move. She kept her eyes locked on the little girl.
"What was that?" Pristoleph asked, but Phyrea didn't answer him.
"He left you, didn't he?" she whispered to the girl.
The expression of bitter rage faltered on the ghost's translucent features, but the anger didn't diminish.
"Phyrea?" Pristoleph asked. She thought he grew hotter then, almost hot enough to burn her. "What did you say? What do you mean?"
"There will have to be a funeral," she said. "He was the master builder."
"The ransar will arrange it," Pristoleph said.
"I don't want to go."
"You should."
She nodded as the little girl faded into thin air. The crying woman's sobs went with her.
"I will not let his murderer go unpunished," Pristoleph assured her, but Phyrea didn't care.
She didn't even have the energy to shrug him off, let alone tell him not to bother.
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1 Alturiak, the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR) The Cascade of Coins, Innarlith
Still in mourning, Phyrea wore black to her wedding. She hadn't carefully considered the choice, and Pristoleph had shown no sign that he cared. When he looked at her in the coach on the way to the temple of Waukeen, he had
looked at her eyes. The softness, the longing, the love she saw in his gaze had warmed her and chilled her at the same time. She felt safe in his presence. Safer, anyway, than when she was alone with the ghosts.
Rain came down in nearly horizontal sheets, driven by a fierce wind off the Lake of Steam. The horses faltered several times, and Phyrea held on to the arm of the coach's velvet bench for fear that the conveyance would be sent over on its side by the frequent, violent gusts.
One of the high priests met them just inside the temple doors. Phyrea didn't know his name, but she recognized his face. Flanked by a quartet of acolytes in robes of shimmering silk, the priest was draped in thread-of-gold, even finer silk, and a variety of fur that Phyrea couldn't immediately identify. His wide, pale face betrayed a reluctance no bride wants to see on her wedding day.
"My dear Senator," the priest said, tipping his chin down in the barest suggestion of a bow. "No guests have arrived."
"There will be no guests," Pristoleph said, his flat voice inviting no response.

"But surely a man of your—" the priest began.
"Do you require guests?" Pristoleph interrupted.
The priest looked down at the marble-tiled floor and Phyrea could tell he was disappointed. He had hoped that a lack of wedding guests would put an end to the affair.
"This has all been arranged," Pristoleph went on. "It has been paid for. Shall we go in?"
"Of course," the priest acquiesced.
Phyrea wiped a drip of rainwater off her temple with one fingertip and leaned in closer to her groom. The warmth that always radiated from Pristoleph soothed her.
A sudden gust of wind rattled the tall, arched window, its intricate panes of stained glass creaked in their gilded frames. All eyes glanced up at it, all of them afraid, if not certain, that the glass would buckle and shatter, but it didn't.
"Perhaps..." the priest began, then shook his head, uncertain what to say.
"Lead on," Pristoleph told him, his voice heavy with impatience.
He won't marry you, the man with the scar told Phyrea. She knew he stood behind her, and that only she could see him, and she was surprised that Waukeen would allow his unholy presence in her temple. He's afraid of you. But I think there are other reasons.
She shook her head and let herself be led deeper into the temple..They followed the priest, who walked slower than a man being marched to the gallows. The wind battered the stained glass windows all around them, seeming to come from all sides at once. The opulent interior was lit by fewer candles than Phyrea knew was typical. Gold, silver, and platinum gleamed in the dim candlelight. Though Pristoleph was as warm as ever, Phyrea shivered.
"Perhaps..." the priest started again. He came to a sudden stop, and two of the acolytes bumped into each other. A nervous shuffling of feet followed.
"Speak, priest," Pristoleph all but growled.
He won't do it, the ghost whispered. He can't.
"This is a bad day," the priest said. Phyrea looked at him, but her eyes were drawn to the acolytes. All four of them stared at the ground, refusing to look at the priest or each other. A tear dripped from the eye of one—a girl barely in her teens. "We have had a... a loss, here."
Pristoleph stiffened and Phyrea put her hand on his arm, the heat under her palm uncomfortable but not yet painful. He was getting warmer. From the corner of her eye she could see Pristoleph's strange red hair begin to dance on his head. The priest wouldn't look at him.
"One of our own was—" the priest started, but stopped when the girl sobbed, loud and sudden. Phyrea startled at the sound of it, so like the

woman who appeared to her as an image of violet light, and of impenetrable sadness.
The girl turned and scampered away, and the priest didn't stop her.
"We are to be married," Pristoleph insisted. "Today."
The priest couldn't seem to be able to make up his mind if he wanted to nod or shake his head, so he just stood there and quivered.
Pristoleph shifted and Phyrea stepped away from him to avoid his elbow. He pulled a small leather pouch from under his rapidly-drying weathercloak, reached his hand in, and came out with a fistful of gold coins. He threw the gleaming disks at the priest's feet. The priest startled away from the loud, sharp, echoing clatter as the coins seemed to shatter on the marble. The windows shook again, and something hit the outside wall hard enough to startle Phyrea and all of the Waukeenar. But not Pristoleph.
"This is not..the priest mumbled.
Pristoleph threw another fistful of gold coins at his feet—more than the little pouch should have been able to contain.
"Please, Senator..."
Another shower of coins. The three remaining acolytes all stepped back as one.
"You will wed us now, and in the name of your goddess," Pristoleph said, and even from a step away Phyrea could feel the heat blazing from him. The acolytes were scared, and so was the priest. "Speak the words, even if your goddess doesn't hear."
The priest gasped. Two of the remaining acolytes turned and ran deeper into the gloom of the massive vaulted chamber. The last of the young priests in training stepped closer to the senator, his eyes bulging with outrage.
The priest held out a hand, gently pushing his student back from the burning groom, and said, "Chose your words carefully in the house of the Merchant's Friend, Senator Pristoleph."
The corner of Pristoleph's mouth curled up in a dangerous smile and he threw yet another handful of coins at the priest's feet.
The Waukeenar nodded and said, "Please hold hands."
Phyrea ignored the protests of at least two of the ghosts that had followed her, and she didn't look at the priest's face, which was a mask of resignation, fear, and exhaustion. Pristoleph's hands burned hers and she cringed at the pain but didn't pull away. He cooled a little as the priest began his prayers.
Words, the man with the scar whispered. Hollow words to a goddess in hiding.
Phyrea shook her head. She didn't care if Waukeen was alive or dead, didn't care how much gold had bought her wedding, and paid no mind to the unnatural boiling heat of the man—if he was a man—she was

swearing her life to.
When the priest spoke his last words and the two of them were man and wife, the giant stained glass window imploded, burst by the fury of the air around them. The acolyte screamed, Pristoleph shrugged, and the priest began to cry.
Pristoleph and Phyrea turned and went back to their coach with the wind whipping rain and shards of glass all around them, their boots crunching broken pieces under their feet, and the sound of the wailing cries of the holy men harmonizing with the moans of the angry wind.
An interesting start, the old woman said, and as they walked out into the driving winter rain, Phyrea saw the violet ghost laughing on the steps of the once-glorious temple.
6_
1 Alturiak, the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR) Pristal Towers, Innarlith
Hi s touch was hot, but not uncomfortably so. Phyrea's body responded in a much more sincere way than her mind. She did her best not to think but to let her body merge with his. She took on his rhythm, almost as though her heartbeat came into perfect synchronization with his. He
moaned, and she responded with a gasp. He squeezed her tighter and she bent beneath him like a tree making way for the wind.
They writhed in the rich satin- and silk-covered goose-down. Sweat rolled from her skin and his seemed to drink it in. His heat warmed her, fed her, made her safe.
She didn't listen to the woman crying over the still form of her only child. She ignored the chuckles of the old hag. She didn't let the little girl's growled outrage stop her. She gave herself to Pristoleph in a way that made the man with the scar on his face shake his head. The little boy with the missing arm screamed filth at them both but she paid him no heed. Instead she gave herself to her husband in a way she'd only allowed one man before him.
And that was the thought that finally worked its way in.
His name came to her first: Ivar Devorast. Then the touch of his rough, calloused hands, the smell of his musk, the sound of his voice.
If Pristoleph sensed that another had, in some way beyond the physical, come into their wedding bed, he gave no sign. Phyrea touched him and moved with him still, was warmed by him and warmed him both, but her mind began to soar from her body, her desires splitting into physical and spiritual.
Ivar Devorast had gone away. She didn't know where. Even Surero had lost touch with him. Phyrea had made inquiries at once subtle and overt, public and private, desperate and resigned. He was gone as though he never existed. His great undertaking had been ripped from

him and gifted to the loudest-squealing toadies of the ransar. Tendays or longer had passed since she'd even thought of it.

And as she made love to her husband on their wedding night, as cursed as it may have been, she even let herself, for the briefest of moments, forget there was an Ivar Devorast. But that brief moment had passed.

A shrill scream tore through her as though she was being sawed in half. Though the sound came from inside her head, still her eardrums trembled against its onslaught. Her body tensed and every instinct in her made her fling Pristoleph from her. She scrambled away from him, but only a few inches, before her legs curled up, her knees knocked her chin, and her eyes pressed so tightly closed her temples began to throb.

Pristoleph's voice came to her as if from the bottom of a deep well. He called her name, confused at first, then insistent. She didn't want to hear any real emotion in his voice, not just then, so her own mind masked the fear and desperation, the uncertainty that poured over her. His hand wrapped around her arm and she trembled but didn't push him away. Tears burned her eyes, hotter even than his touch.

"I can make them go away," he all but shouted into her ear. His breath scalded her. "Let me help you."

She shook her head and was only barely conscious of telling him no.

The little girl screamed again, and Phyrea sobbed and stiffened. When the apparition began to break things—a vase, a mirror, a windowpane—Pristoleph leaped from the bed, his hair dancing on his scalp like flames.

"Go away!" he roared at the room itself.

She screamed the word "No," over and over and over again until the little girl stopped screaming and started laughing.

Never let him say that again, the man with the scar warned her.

We will kill you both if you let him say that again, the old woman threatened.

And it will hurt, said the little boy.

Then they went silent all at once. Nothing more was broken, and the feeling of them fled her. Phyrea let a convulsing sob vibrate through her sweat-soaked flesh then wiped the tears from her eyes.

"No," she whispered.

Pristoleph stood naked before her, heat radiating from his body, and she could tell that if he touched her then she would be burned. She felt herself smile when she thought of the pain—the pain that would make it go away—and she reached out for him.

Pristoleph took a step back away from her.

Embarrassed, she drew the satin sheet up to her shoulders to cover her nakedness, then turned her face away from him to cover her shame.

7_____
2 Alturiak, the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR) Temple of the Delicate Chaos, Innarlith
"Xou seem very certain of Senator Pristoleph's desires," Wenefir said, his eyebrows crunched together in thought. "Has he said as much to you?"
"Does he have to?" Marek Rymiit asked. He smiled at the Cyricist who sat across from him. Wenefir's bloated, too-soft body reeked of stale perfume and sweat. The gold and silver goblet in his hand had been drained and refilled eight times by an emaciated boy in a clean white tunic. The boy's face was as soft and as clean as his clothing, but his eyes appeared almost dead. Even Marek didn't want to imagine what so youthful a servant must have been put through to burn so much of him away. "What else is there for him?"
"I assure you, Master Rymiit, the subject of the Palace of Many Spires has come up between the senator and myself on numerous occasions. Not only has he never expressed an interest in the position, but he has repeatedly criticized those who covet it."
"They say it is a woman's prerogative to change her mind," said the Thayan, "and we both know the same holds true for men—but for genasi, who knows?"
Wenefir bristled at the word genasi, and Marek returned the look with a smile.
"I am no fool, Priest of Cyric," the wizard said. "Our friend's... father, was it?... was a native of the Elemental Plane of Fire."
"Careful, Master Rymiit," Wenefir warned, then once again emptied his goblet.
The boy stepped up with the ewer, but the Cyricist waved him away.
"Ever careful, thank you, Master Wenefir," Marek replied with a wink. "I have friends and close associates among the planetouched, as among other races. I hold no prejudices in that regard."
"But some in this city do," Wenefir said.
"As a foreigner myself, I can assure you that you are indeed correct. Should Pristoleph wish to continue to keep his secret, as open as it might be among those with more than the most rudimentary education, so be it. I have kept and will continue to keep secrets aplenty on his behalf and others'."
Wenefir nodded and waved that train of thought away. They both had secrets, they all had secrets, and both he and Wenefir knew that their secrets would be kept as long as—and only just as long as—it was in the keeper's best interest to hold them.
"If it's true what you say of his ambitions," Wenefir said, "and I am not saying it is true, then this marriage is even more disastrous. Is it not?"
Marek shrugged and smiled broader. "Phyrea is a delightful girl, just

the type that Pristoleph and—dare I utter his cursed name—Ivar Devorast are most drawn to. Or so I'm told." He winked at Wenefir, who grimaced. "I think she'll add an air of refinement and culture, not to mention her father's numerous contacts, to our friend's social arsenal, don't you?"

"No," Wenefir replied, not bothering to mask his surprise-even outrage at Marek's sudden change of opinion. "No, I
most certainly do not. First of all, her father's contacts fled him the second his life was beaten out of him with his own leg."

Marek searched the priest's mien for any hint that he knew it was Marek who had arranged that ignoble death, but if he did know, he didn't betray himself.

"Secondly, it is well known throughout the city-state that Phyrea is mad, and I don't mean that garden variety madness that strikes all the scions of the aristocracy in their youth, but well and truly insane. If anything, an association with her will do him damage—considerable damage. I was certain you agreed with me on that, at least, and not long ago."

Marek shrugged in a theatrical way he hoped wouldn't too deeply wound the Cyricist.

"Well," said the Thayan, "I suppose I'll have to summon that prerogative we touched on earlier."

" 'Cyric smiles on those who change their minds,'" Wenefir recited, but it was plain he didn't believe it—at least not just then. "But still___"

"But still," Marek said, "it seems to you as though my stated loyalty to Senator Pristoleph is in question."

"No more in question than your stated loyalty to Ransar Salatis."

Marek took that opportunity to lift his too-heavy goblet and sip the cloying, sweet wine. Wenefir swallowed, too, doing his best to mask the trepidation he obviously felt at having challenged the Red Wizard. Even in the safety of his secret, monster-infested temple, Wenefir had to know how powerful an enemy Marek Rymiit would be—the same way Marek knew that Wenefir was hardly a man to be trifled with.

"Here we sit," the Thayan said, "in a temple dedicated to the Mad God. I know that your own loyalty is to that master. I think it goes without saying that when all is said and done my loyalty is to a certain tharchion far, far away in my beloved homeland. But alas, all has not been said or
done, so here we are. You threw your lot in with Pristoleph early, I hear, and have maintained that even after you found a new, much more powerful and compelling master to serve. I have remained loyal to the highest bidder, while nurturing a loyalty to the next highest."

"And Pristoleph is the next highest?"

"Pristoleph," Marek said with a grin, "may well be the highest of all."

Wenefir swallowed again and looked off into the gloom of the subterranean chamber. He held up his goblet and the dead-eyed boy stepped to him and filled it again. He brought the cup to his lips but stopped before he drank and looked up at Marek, his eyes cold and hard. Marek returned the glare with a smile and Wenefir took a small sip of wine.

"So you will make a ransar of Pristoleph," the Cyricist said. "And he'll be a ransar with more coins than friends."

"Only the poorest of the Fourth Quarter wretches have more friends than coins, my friend," Marek relied. "And between the two of us, I should think, we could muster sufficient support."

"A process, I can guess, that you've already begun."

"In earnest," Marek replied with a wink. "Senator Sitre has made his intentions known."

Wenefir's eyes briefly crossed and he shook his head.

"I know, I know," Marek said, holding out a hand as though to steady the priest from across the space between them. "Sitre has long been a close associate of Salatis's, but the Palace of Many Spires does tend to inspire as much jealousy as it does awe, especially in the unimaginative."

"Indeed," said the priest.

"I wonder," Marek said, making a show of looking up at the ceiling, "what two men with the proper imagination could muster in a place like Innarlith?"

He looked back at Wenefir, who gazed off into the gloom again, imagining.

8

12 Alturiak, the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR) The Grand Canal of the Second Emperor, Shou Lung

Ivar Devorast sat on a hill a hundred and thirty miles west along the Grand Canal of the Second Emperor from the city of Wuhu, a hundred and fifty miles northwest of Ch'ungkung. Ran Ai Yu stopped, the bowls of rice beginning to burn her hands, and stared at him. She had seen westerners in Shou Lung before, had seen the faraway, lost looks in their eyes, the confusion and fear in their halting speech, the insecurity that came from being in a place at once familiar and so alien. She knew she'd felt the same the first time she'd ventured west into Faerun, and she still felt that way most of the time, even after having spent so much time in Innarlith, Calimport, and surrounding cities.

But Ivar Devorast showed none of that discomfort. His eyes darted from the unfamiliar to the exotic without ever betraying a sense of the. difference between one and the other. He'd picked up a few words of Kao te Shou already, even though they had been in her home

country for but a few days.
The voyage had lasted a month—fast even for her—and Devorast had seemed equally at home aboard the vessel he'd built for her, the wondrous Jie Zud, as he was passing through the occasional magical portal they'd used to shave time from the voyage. She had been concerned about his reaction to that, but he'd had none. He seemed either to trust her to convey him safely to Shou Lung, or he simply didn't care. She hoped it was the former, but feared it was the latter.
And so there he sat, on a high hilltop overlooking the Grand Canal of the Second Emperor, stretched out far
below them, a ribbon of blue-black water no different from any river. On the other side, following the canal's lazily-winding course between the moundlike hills ran the Kaifeng Highway, a band of dusty brown punctuated here and there by the clouds of dust kicked up by a passing caravan. Ships and barges alike plied the waters of the canal, square sails making the most of the cool, strong breeze that tore through the hills. He sat facing north into Hungtse Province, though where he sat was the northern frontier of Wang Kuo. Ran Ai Yu knew that Ivar Devorast cared little for that distinction, or for any of the names people had given anything. She spared a glance at her own ship, which sat tied to the edge of the canal three hundred feet below. The ceramic tiles sparkled in the sunlight, and the sight of it filled her with awe, even though it had been hers for more than six years.
"Rice?" Devorast asked, not turning his head.
Ran Ai Yu smiled and stepped forward, not speaking until she had come to his side and he looked up at her.
"Yours will be no less impressive," she said.
He glanced at the bowl of rice she held out to him and cracked just the tiniest of smiles. Ran Ai Yu felt her heart expand in her chest, but she fought down the feeling. She couldn't keep herself from blushing, though, but Devorast didn't seem to notice.
He took the bowl from her hand and said, "Thank you. For the rice."
"May I sit?" she asked, and he nodded.
She sank into a lotus position next to him, close but not so close that anything could be implied. She took a deep breath and settled her own rice bowl in the folds of her robe.
They sat for a long time in silence, neither of them eating, just staring off into the distance at the bald hills on the other side of the canal, at the wakes of the boats running along the water, and the clouds drifting lazily across the azure sky.
"You will have to go back," she said, and her jaw started to tremble so she closed her mouth. "I have only been here a few days." "And what have you learned?"
He didn't answer for a long time, so Ran Ai Yu waited.

"Did I come here to learn something?" he asked her finally, the sound of a challenge in his voice.
"Didn't you?" she asked. "You came here to see the Grand Canal of the Second Emperor, and here it is. Will it help you build your own?"
He nodded but seemed determined to leave it at that.
"They will finish it without you," she said. "They will try, at least."
Again, he failed to respond.
"You can stay here as long as you like," she said. "It would be my honor should you decide to accompany me to my home in Tsingtao. There you can stay for as long as you wish."
She didn't expect an answer from him, and got none.
"Should you decide to stay in self-imposed exile"—at that he looked at her, startling her—"then nothing would make me happier than to be your host for as long as you wish. But you should not choose that. You should not go to Tsingtao with me, or stay here upon this hill. You should return to finish what you have begun, and finish it in your own way, and in your own time."
He sighed—a rare sound indeed from Ivar Devorast.
"I will take you back, if you wish," she said, "aboard JieZud."
Another long stretch of silence passed while she watched two clouds slowly collide and merge over the far hills of Hungtse.
"How long was that?" Ivar Devorast asked.
Ran Ai Yu looked at him, but he continued to stare out at the horizon.
"How long did we just go without speaking?" he asked.
Ran Ai Yu shook her head.
"I am curious about things like that," he said. "We measure distance. We break it up into inches, feet, and miles. But time passes only at the whim of greater forces: the sun, the moon, the stars, and the tides."
Ran Ai Yu narrowed her eyes, and try as she might, she could not understand what Ivar Devorast meant to tell her.
"You should go back," she said, unable to keep the regret from her voice.
He looked out into the far reaches of the farthest east.
9_
20 Alturiak, the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR) Firesteap Citadel
They stepped out of the coach and into a cacophony of taps and cracks. Hundreds of men milled about, seemingly at random, groups surrounding pairs fighting each other with wooden swords. Other rings of men encircled half a dozen men fighting another half a dozen men with long, blunt-ended poles. Orders and encouragement—and more than a few insults and jibes—burst free of the general din.
Pristoleph nodded to a lieutenant who saluted him and helped Phyrea down from the coach. Not paying attention to the lieutenant's status report, Pristoleph watched his young bride take in the scene. She

squinted in the winter overcast from under a wide-brimmed hat.
"Thank you, Lieutenant," Pristoleph said, cutting off the officer's report.
The soldier bowed and scurried away into the general confusion.
"You're sure you're well?" Pristoleph said, allowing every bit of the doubt he held to show in both his voice and his face.
Phyrea didn't look at him. She held a small black parasol under one arm, which she fiddled with. He couldn't help
thinking she wanted to open it, as though the dull gray light was too bright for her. He'd been noticing that she was growing more and more sensitive to light, as though she was becoming a creature of the Underdark, and he didn't like that.
As he continued to watch her, her tight squint began to relax a little and she almost began to smile.
"Well?" he prompted.
"This is yours now?" she asked, and he could tell she was impressed. Just then Pristoleph thought he'd somehow done the impossible. "You bought this?"
"The citadel?" he replied, taking her by the arm and leading her along the winding dirt track that led through the drilling grounds toward the tall stone fortress. "Firesteap Citadel belongs to the ransar—or, well, let's say, the people of Innarlith. I bought the castellan."
She smiled at him and he had no choice but to smile back.
"I served here," he told her, his thoughts spinning back to those simpler times.
"I can't imagine you as a soldier," she said.
"I'll admit I wasn't much of a footman," he confided. "I had... other duties."
"Oh?"
"Let's just say that I provided an essential ... supply service for my comrades in arms."
"Yes," she said with a light laugh—lighter than he'd heard from her in some time, if ever, "let's just say that."
She slowed as they passed close to a group of soldiers lined up parallel to each other, swinging wooden pole arms in mock combat. One head turned her way, then another and another, until a sergeant started yelling at them while he looked Phyrea up and down himself. Pristoleph could see that she was so used to that sort of attention from that sort of man, that she didn't notice it at all.
"I want you to stay here for a while," he said, once again leading her slowly toward the citadel. "The city may not be entirely safe—at least not for long."
He looked at her, expecting her to look at him. Instead she seemed to be listening to one of those voices that only she could hear. He had to

look away. When he watched her do that, his heart ached. Either she was indeed possessed, or she was mad. Either way he could pay a priest to make her better, but she refused to even hear of it. If anything else was mysteriously broken in his house, though, he would have her exorcised whether she agreed to it or not.

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5Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR) Firesteap Citadel

Marek watched Insithryllax fidget. The black dragon wore his human guise, but his coal-dark eyes darted across the sky above him, his feet shuffled, and his shoulders twitched like a restless bird. The day was unseasonably warm, the sky a pure blue untroubled by clouds, and the dragon wanted to fly.

"He is himself again," Wenefir said. His voice made Insithryllax jump a little and turn with an angry twist to his heavy brow. The priest of Cyric ignored him and went on, "I don't know if it's the clean southern air, or maybe even that trollop of his, but it's as though he's returned from a long journey."

Marek shrugged while bowing to Wenefir in greeting. All three of them turned their eyes down to the ground fifty feet or more below them. From the top of the citadel, they could see the whole of the mustering grounds. There Pristoleph's newly-acquired private army marched and drilled.

"Certainly you agree, Master Rymiit?" Wenefir prompted.

Marek shrugged and said, "I've seen better prepared, better armed, and better disciplined armies in my day."

He could sense Wenefir stiffen at his side but didn't look at him. Instead, he let his gaze wander back to Insithryllax, who had once again turned his attention to the beckoning sky.

"Well," the Cyricist huffed, "of course we all have." Marek could tell that Wenefir hadn't. "Still, it's been barely three months."

"And they weren't an army before?" Marek teased with a smile.

The priest didn't return the smile when he replied, "Not hardly. They were rabble, most of them, living off the paltry wages of Salatis's sorry excuse for a military— and more than one of them had other interests ... other business interests that is."

"They were thieves," Marek said.

"The best of them were, yes," Wenefir replied, "while others either supported or extorted the camp followers, provided private security or other dark deeds for whatever coin might have been thrown at them... they were thieves, yes, and murderers, too."

"I seem to recall," Marek said, enjoying every second of what he was about to say with a wide, toothy grin, "hearing tell of a young soldier named Pristoleph who, some decades ago, provided his comrades in arms with the company of women ... women, one might say, of

generous affections."
Wenefir tensed and Marek got the distinct impression the priest was holding himself rigid, as though unwilling to give the Red Wizard the satisfaction of whirling on him. His jaw tensed, his eyes closed, then all at once he relaxed. Behind him, the black dragon stared at the priest with the threat of violence in his eyes.
"What is it about you, I wonder," Wenefirsaid, forcing a smile on his face with obvious difficulty, "that causes me to underestimate you in all the least important ways?"
"Let us call it 'charisma' and leave it at that," Marek replied.
The priest tipped his head in acquiescence and once again the three of them turned their attention to Pristoleph at the head of his army.
11 _
14 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR) Firesteap Citadel
f*hyrea dreamed of a monster with a beautiful face.
A snake, but bigger than any she'd ever imagined. Its smooth, dry scales shimmered in the dim candlelight, throwing off sparks of every color. She watched it approach the foot of her bed. While one part of her mind tried in vain to assign its slithering form a single color, another part screamed at her to move, to leap from bed and flee.
But she couldn't move. The satin and silk bedclothes were loose and warm around her, but still she felt as though they held her firmly against the mattress. She lay on her back, her neck propped up on her favorite pillow, her arms at her sides, palms down, as stiff and as heavy as the world itself. Her legs might have been made of stone. She could breathe—more and more in rapid, panting gasps—and her eyes could move in her head, but even her throat refused to allow a cry for help. Instead she gurgled once, then began to breathe even harder, faster.
She looked at the door, still closed and locked, and hoped that Pristoleph would finally come to bed, that he would open the door, see the monster bearing down on her, and kill it before it could eat her, before it could enslave her mind, before it could ravage her still, helpless body. But the door remained closed, and no sound came from the corridor beyond.
The enormous snake stared Phyrea in the eye. Its face was that of a beautiful young girl, but with shimmering multicolored scales in place of youthful flesh. Hair that
resembled the feathers of a bird pressed down on its scalp to just barely frame its perfectly-proportioned features. One side of its lips, tightly pressed together, curled up in a smile dripping with murderous glee.
Phyrea had to look away. Her eyes went to the thin window—an arrow loop, really—and the starless night sky beyond. The sounds of

the soldiers camped at the foot of the mighty fortress had long since quieted, and Phyrea knew she could expect no help from that quarter either.

Once again trying to speak, and once again having no luck, she turned again to face her attacker, but the monster was gone. In its place, shimmering with all the same colors, twinkling in the candlelight just the same, was the woman she had seen so many times since that fateful stay at her family's country estate.

The greens and reds, blues and oranges, faded into a familiar uniform violet when the woman's knee came down on the bed at Phyrea's feet. She had never seen one of the ghosts make an impression in furniture before, though the little girl had taken to breaking things. Something about the way the bed dipped under her weight made Phyrea want to scream even louder than she had at the sight of the snake-thing.

"Don't tell me you want to live," the woman said, and Phyrea's blood ran even colder in her already frigid veins. The voice echoed in her ears, not her mind—she was sure of it. "You can't want to live."

Phyrea opened her mouth to—to what? To scream? To respond? To argue or agree? Even she didn't know.

The woman crawled over her, straddling her prone, helpless form. Phyrea watched a tear well up in the woman's left eye and trace a path of purple light down her cheek. The ghost grimaced and sobbed, and Phyrea felt tears come to her own eyes.

"I want you to know something," the woman said, and the tear hung from the gentle curve of her chili. "I need to tell you what happened to me."

Phyrea tried to shake her head, but couldn't. The woman's face hung above her, and the tear fell onto Phyrea's chest. She felt it—hot on her night-cool skin.

"It was a long time ago," said the woman of violet light. "I remember that summer. It was the hottest summer I ever knew. People died in Innarlith that summer, and not only in the Fourth Quarter. They suffocated in their sleep, the air itself betraying them."

Phyrea wanted to close her eyes but couldn't.

"It was the Year of the Black Hound," the ghost went on—seventy-three years gone by, Phyrea thought. "It was the year of my greatest joy."

Phyrea wanted to beg her to stop, but still she couldn't speak. The woman's right hand closed over Phyrea's neck, the fingers warm and soft.

"She was born on the twenty-eightli day of Ches, on a warm spring day, to the sound of my husband's joyful sobs, and the inviting happiness of our assembled family. The midwife gave her to me, her cry strong with the promise of a long life, and she nursed right away,

and with healthy abandon. From my bedside my own mother told me I had waited three days to nurse, and all agreed it was a good sign. She was a good baby. A good baby."
The woman's other hand wrapped around Phyrea's neck and with two hands she began to squeeze. Phyrea's tears blurred the face of the ghostly woman, until only the soft violet glow—and the voice—was left.
"She did everything early. She smiled, she laughed—she was my joy. She was my life. She was Anjeel. The world should know that her name was Anjeel."
No air passed through Phyrea's throat. She did everything she could to struggle, but there was no use. Her body had seemingly already died—perhaps that was it. Her stubborn, impatient mind was simply being helped along, was being forced by the ghost's crushing fingers to follow her arms and legs to oblivion.
"It was that summer," the woman went on. "That summer.
The heat. The stench from the Lake of Steam. One morning I went to the nursery—"
The woman's voice caught. Phyrea tried to gasp for air, tried to do anything—tried even to die more quickly, to just be done with it—but could only lie there. The woman's grip on her throat tightened. Pain lanced through her, sending bolts of agony up through her face and into her temples. Her vision went dark then came back again and she could blink. The tears fell from her eyes and rolled down the side of her face, burning her skin they were so hot. She blinked again and the woman made of violet light had taken on solid form.
The dream ended. The dim candlelight was gone, replaced only by the ambient light from the campfires far below, and the dim embers from her bedchamber hearth. The violet glow was gone too, and the woman who sat atop her, whose hands were even then squeezing the last of the life from Phyrea, had a new face.
Her skin was dark brown, the color of freshly tilled soil, and her hair, slicked back tightly against her scalp was as black as the endless Abyss—a black to match her cold, heartless eyes. Her clothes were a mix of black wool, black leather, and black silk, and the glint of steel betrayed a row of slim throwing knives sheathed along the length of a leather strap that went from her left shoulder to right hip.
She was no ghost.
Phyrea's vision dimmed around the edges. Her lungs burned.
The door opened.
Torchlight flooded the room and the woman who was strangling Phyrea turned her head and tightened her grip at the same time. Phyrea was only dimly aware of a new fear creeping into her mind: that her head might come away from her shoulders before she was

successfully throttled.
Phyrea heard something, but the part of her mind that could interpret words had gone dark. All that was left was a burning, desperate, but helpless need to take in—
—a breath!
Her lungs filled with air, cool in her burning throat. The fingers had come away. She rocked and bobbed on the soft mattress, still only dimly aware of anything but her own breathing. She gasped and choked, sputtered and gagged as around her the bed shook, someone shouted, feet stomped on the wood floor.
Phyrea tried to sit up but couldn't. She had one hand at her throat, feeling it spasm as it fought to replenish lungs that had been fully emptied of life-sustaining air. The paralysis was fading, but slowly, and just as slowly her consciousness returned.
She blinked and could see the woman standing at her bedside, her lithe form a study in shades of black. The assassin slipped a knife from the strap, which had been emptied of half the weapons Phyrea had seen before. She didn't so much throw it as flick it and it seemed to simply disappear from her hand.
The grunt that followed was unmistakably Pristoleph's.
"Close your eyes!" he barked. "Phyrea, close your eyes!"
She didn't want to. She wanted to see him, but she did as she was told. Fire washed over her. She felt and smelled her hair singe. There was a loud scream that at first Phyrea thought might have been her own, but her throat was still too raw, too tight to make a sound like that—not a sound that loud, and so inhuman. The scream was like a dozen screams woven into one, a chorus of sounds from a single throat.
Phyrea opened her eyes and saw the woman. Smoke whirled around her, rising into the air from her shoulders, arms, and head. She didn't seem to be burned when she turned to look Phyrea in the eye. What passed between them in that look was what must pass between a wolf and a sheep when the shepherd's arrow finds its mark—anger, frustration, and a promise they would see each other again.
The woman slithered out the window, which from where Phyrea lay appeared far too thin to accommodate her, and
she was gone. Too late, a sword blade rang against the stone windowsill, sending a spark out into the night.
The sword sliced back across the stone with a shower of tinier, short-lived sparks, and Pristoleph cursed. He didn't spare the time to look out the window before he tossed the weapon to the floorboards and fell at Phyrea's side on the bed. Blood soaked his dirty white tunic in at least three places.
"Phyrea!"
She coughed and made herself smile. He lifted her up, and though it

hurt her at first to bend at the waist, the movement brought blood into veins that felt dried and brittle, and she was able to move a little more, just enough to put a hand on his shoulder, but not enough to keep it there.

He turned and shouted for Wenefir, and Phyrea let the darkness take her at last.

12__

18 Mirtul, the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR) The Palace of Many Spires, Innarlith

Do you have a garden of your own?" Ransar Salatis asked.

T'juyu seethed, but didn't allow herself to show it. Instead, she shook her head in the human custom and finished her quick but thorough examination of the rooftop garden. Within the space of a dozen of the human's ploddingly slow heartbeats she had traced in her mind's eye the path to nearly as many escape points. The garden was shockingly unsecured, especially for being what appeared to be the ransar's most favored place in the sprawling palace.

"A pity," the man rasped. His throat must have been as dry as an Anauroch summer. T'juyu didn't pity him so much as tolerate him. "Gardens are our way of writing our prayers to the Daughter of the High Forest on the world beneath her."

T'juyu might have bristled at that, had she paid the forest demigoddess more than a passing respect. She let her eyes dart around the garden and was not just unimpressed, but offended by the way the trees and flowering plants had been imprisoned in pots and boxes, trimmed and tamed into ghastly, unnatural mockeries of their natural forms.

"I didn't come here to speak of idle pursuits," she said, the sound of her own voice coming to her ears in the coarse, guttural tones of the primitive creatures she'd surrounded herself with.

"It is not an idle pursuit," the ransar replied, looking at her with his brows close together, and his jaw set in a firm scowl. Had she really been the creature he thought her to be, she might have been afraid of him just then. He was the most powerful man in the city-state after all, and it would have seemed that she was entirely in his power—alone with him in his garden, in his palace, at night. "This garden is a statement of faith."

"My apologies, Ransar," she said, playing along.

"Sit," he said, gesturing to a moss-covered marble bench.

T'juyu nodded and sat, ignoring how the moss slipped under her. It hadn't grown on its own accord but had been placed there. Salatis sat next to her with a sigh. His breath smelled of rotten vegetables and dust—an old man's stink.

"Praise be to the Dancer in the Glades," Salatis said, his eyes closed,

his right hand covering a pendant that hung on a gold chain around his neck.
"The Lady of the Woods blesses us," T'juyu replied.
He looked at her with surprise that quickly turned into an almost comical, boyish delight. He smiled and his hand came away from the pendant: a golden acorn about the size of his thumb. The ransar sighed and looked up into the sky, once more devoid of stars, and heavy with the threat of rain.
"I bring you a disappointing report," T'juyu said.
"Disappointing for you," he asked, trying to be clever but only irritating her, "or disappointing for me?"
"For both of us," she replied quickly, so that his cleverness wouldn't have time to take hold. "I failed."
He sighed again, and T'juyu grimaced at the smell of his breath. She wanted to stand but made herself stay seated next to him. He sat on her left, so she drew the throwing knife from her right boot with her right hand, holding it in her palm, against the side of the bench. Salatis didn't look down but continued to stare into the empty blackness of the night sky. If he was disappointed enough in her failure to try to kill her, she would defend herself.
"There's more," she said.
"Did you fail entirely?" he asked. "It was to be both of them—the wife too."
"They both live," she said.
"Are you disappointed in yourself?" he asked.
T'juyu shook her head. She hadn't really ever had a stake in the death of that one senator and his wife. She had come to Innarlith for reasons of her own, but that commission, from the ransar no less, brought her closer in to the humans' city and their barbaric leaders. Still, it rankled her that the woman had awakened before she died. It bothered her that the senator had come in when he did. And she was still confused by the fire___
"I will take that as a yes," he said, apparently not having seen her shake her head.
It was T'juyu's turn to sigh.
"There will be other opportunities," he said.
"You are tired," T'juyu said, looking at the side of his face, at the deep lines around his eyes and mouth, the white in the stubble of his beard. "I am sorry."
She knew that last didn't sound as sincere as it should have, but the ransar didn't seem to mind.
"It's a strange thing, disappointment," he said as though speaking to the night itself and not just to her. "It comes
to you in the most unexpected guises and at the most inopportune

times. It is unpredictable. Unpredictable...."
T'juyu looked away from him. He was babbling and there was something about his demeanor that disturbed her greatly. She had very little direct experience with humans, but she had seen their works often enough: strange vehicles dragged by servile animals, vessels afloat on the seas and rivers, and cities that sprawled over acre after acre of land cleared by a dizzying variety of tools. Surely no species could have achieved all those things with such unstable and preoccupied minds. Salatis must have been unusual in that regard.
"I bring other news," she said.
"News other than your failure?"
"I will not expect to be paid," she said, growing angrier.
He shook his head and waved her off.
"He is building an army," she said.
The ransar sighed and looked at her, his eyes drooping and red.
"An army?" he asked. "I knew it. I had... heard that."
"It is a sizable force," T'juyu said.
"Big enough, do you think, to threaten me?" he asked. "Big enough to overthrow me?"
"I don't know for certain, but it... it is a sizable force, and they are preparing for something."
"The defense of the southern approaches?" he said, and it took her a heartbeat or two to decide he was joking. He smiled a weary smile and said, "I knew that. I suspected that."
"What will you do?"
"I will fight him," he said, though she'd never heard a less enthusiastic proclamation. "I still command the black firedrakes. I still command the city, the loyalty of the senate... ?"
That last had the unmistakable sound of a question. T'juyu realized he didn't know who to trust, or what he truly controlled, if anything.
"You're tired," she whispered, replacing the throwing knife in her boot with only the smallest degree of stealth, because only the smallest degree was necessary.
The ransar shook his head.
"Shall I try again?" she asked.
He shrugged and though she waited far longer than she wanted to, he didn't say anything else. Finally, she stood, gave him a shallow bow that he ignored, and walked away. For all she knew, Salatis spent the rest of the night sitting on that bench, staring at nothing, a tired old man too beaten to realize just how beaten he was.
T'juyu left the palace with the distinct impression that she had chosen the wrong side.
13_
8Eleint, the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR) First Quarter, Innarlith

How is it possible that you haven't changed at all?" Surero asked.
Devorast glanced at the alchemist, shrugged, then looked down when a Shou sailor set his canvas bag down on the planks next to him. The young man bowed and scurried back up the gangplank to the deck of the ceramic ship.
"It's been a mess since you've been gone," Surero went on. "People are saying there's going to be another in our long line of civil wars."
"That can't have anything to do with my having been gone," Devorast said.
Surero didn't realize he was joking at first, so rare a thing that was with Devorast. He smiled as Devorast picked up his bag and turned to look back at the ship. Ran Ai Yu stood at the rail and held up a hand. Devorast returned the gesture, turned back, and started to walk. Glancing back a few times at the Shou merchant captain,
who continued to stare at Devorast's receding back, Surero fell into step beside him.
"She isn't coming?" Surero asked.
"She's moving on up the Sword Coast to trade."
As they walked the length of the long pier, Devorast looked at the ships tied up along the way. Surero watched his critical gaze run up the masts and follow the length of their rails. Ahead of them, a gang of stevedores unloaded barrels from a groaning old coaster while the crew hooted at them from the rail. The smell of decayed flesh, intermingled with the sulfurous stench of the Lake of Steam assailed them as they walked, and Devorast slowed. Surero took his arm to keep him moving at pace.
"Zombies," the alchemist said, "courtesy of the Red Wizards of Thay."
Devorast didn't react with the same sort of horrified fascination most people did when they first encountered the new breed of dockhands. Still, it was plain enough in his expression that he didn't approve.
"It's worse," Surero told him. He found it difficult to go on. He didn't want to say it, but he knew Devorast needed to know. "They're building the canal, too."
The sigh that came from Devorast was one of the most frightening sounds Surero had ever heard. He shivered as they passed the zombie work gang. None of the undead creatures paused in their slow, methodical work to notice them. Both men put hands to their faces, covering their noses as they passed.
"They're still working on it," Devorast said. "I'm surprised."
Surero could tell he was disappointed as well.
"Salatis has made speeches about it," said the alchemist. "He said all the right things then put the whole project in the hands of a fool named Horemkensi. Do you know him?"
Devorast shook his head. They left the zombie longshoremen behind.

"Accidents..." Surero started, then just shook his head. "It's been a long time."
"I was told that you were brewing beer," Devorast said, and Surero was surprised to see him smiling.
"I am," Surero admitted. "I don't mind it, actually. I make good beer."
The alchemist sighed and said, "It's been a long time."
"Has it?"
"Seven months?"
"Are they following the plans?" Devorast asked. "My drawings?"
"The best they can, I think," Surero said. "But their best is horrendous. There's a hope that the new ransar will be more inclined to bring you back. If there is a new ransar, "that is."
"If there's one thing I've learned in the time I've been in Innarlith," Devorast said as they stepped off the wood-plank pier and onto the gravel streets of the First Quarter, "it's that there will always be another ransar."
Surero smiled and said, "You haven't changed."
"It hasn't been that long. We have a lot of work to do."
"What do you intend to do?"
Devorast didn't miss a step. "I intend to finish it—my way, whoever the ransar is."
14_
2 Uktar, the Year of the Gauntlet (1369 DR) Firesteap Citadel
Irom a distance they looked like lions—big, solidly-muscled cats built more for strength than speed or stealth. At first she didn't even notice the third set of limbs, forward and higher up from their front legs, but at the end of those limbs were hands, and in those hands they carried weapons. Their heads, like their bodies, were more lion than man, but even from far away, it was the eyes that made them different.
"Innarlans won't like them," Phyrea said when she heard Pristoleph step onto the roof behind her.
He chuckled and stood next to her, his hands folded together and resting on the top of a battlement.
"They're not even human," Phyrea added.
"The current ransar employs undead to build the canal and to crew the docks," Pristoleph reminded her. "Surely a few of their neighbors from the south won't disturb people too much."
"The zombies that work the docks belong to you. And who says anyone likes them? At least Salatis's are well outside the city walls."
Phyrea felt more than heard a sigh in her head. It was the old woman, and she was tired of being out in the southern frontier, at the hard and crowded fortress surrounded by soldiers.
"The people of Innarlith are accustomed to a certain transience in the position of ransar," Pristoleph said, and Phyrea winced at the

implication.
They're going to kill him, the man with the scar on his face whispered in her ear.
"Yes, they are," she whispered back.
"Well," Pristoleph said with a surprised smile, "you're easy to convince today."
Phyrea shook her head in reply.
"The wemics have no interest in Innarlith," he said. "I'm sure you won't have to worry about their crude tents lowering the property values in the Second Quarter."
They'll kill him in public, said the old woman. They'll make a show of it.
"What do they fight for then?" she asked, ignoring the ghost.
"Magic weapons."
She narrowed her eyes and turned on the senator.
"It's almost too easy," he went on. "They're obsessed with enchanted weapons—any sort of weapon, and any sort of enchantment."
"And you buy the weapons from the Thayan."
Pristoleph shrugged, the look on his face not quite petty enough to be smug, but he was indeed pleased with himself as he stared out over his growing army.
"There are costs with Marek Rymiit that go far beyond the coin," she warned him, her face flushing when she realized it was both unnecessary and useless for her to try.
"I am familiar with his desires," Pristoleph said, "and much more in touch with his true motives than he realizes."
"You are a brilliant man, Pristoleph, but Rymiit is something else."
Pristoleph shrugged again and said, "He's killed, driven into exile, or employed every other mage of reasonable skill in Innarlith. I need the weapons because I need the wemics, so I deal with Marek Rymiit."
"And you have them," she said with a sigh. "So what are you waiting for?"
He laughed and said, "Are you anxious for me to make my move on the Palace of Many Spires because you miss the city life, or because you believe I'm ready to win?"
"I just don't understand what's taking so long."
She wrapped her fur-collared weathercloak around her more tightly and held her arms around her, shivering in the early winter chill. It was colder on the roof of the citadel than it was on the ground, but she had grown to like the solitude it afforded her, even if the view made her nervous. She didn't like the sight of the army gathering, while at the same time something about it—something insubstantial but in its own way powerful—drew her to it.
"You're cold," he said, stepping closer to her.

He wrapped his arms around her from behind and she could feel his abnormal warmth radiating through even her thick clothing. The feeling made her close her eyes, made her breathe a little more slowly, and made the ghosts seem just a little farther away.
Enjoy it while it lasts, the woman who mourned her dead child called from beyond the grave.
"Enjoy it while it lasts," Phyrea whispered in response.
"It will last," Pristoleph said into her ear, his breath uncomfortably hot on her neck, "as long as I decide it will last."
"Are you certain of that?" she asked, but of course he was. He didn't even bother to stiffen. If anything, he held her only tighter. "Marek Rymiit may have something to say about that."
"He can say what he wishes," Pristoleph said. "When I am ransar, I'll —"
"Is that what Salatis said?" she interrupted. "I wonder if he said those same words, back in the Year of the Staff."
"Rymiit is a powerful man, but he's got his weaknesses, too. He's a dandy and he craves attention. He manipulates, but he can be manipulated."
"And he says the same about you," Phyrea said, regretting the words the moment they left her mouth.
He stepped away from her. "I had hoped you'd have more confidence in me by now."
She went to him and he embraced her. They shared a kiss and she put her hands on the side of his face. Her hair blew in the wind, whipping his cheeks, but he didn't seem to mind.
"He will help you," she said, "the same way he helped Salatis, and he will destroy you the same way he's about to destroy Salatis."
Pristoleph pushed her away, though gently. She never let her eyes leave his.
You're right, the old woman told her. Phyrea didn't look over Pristoleph's shoulder. She knew she'd see the apparition on the roof behind him. You're right about everything. What would he do, I wonder, if you threw yourself off the roof right now? Haven't you thought about that? I know you have. Just step off into—
"Nothing," Phyrea whispered, shaking her head. "Into thin air."
No, the old woman said, a pleading quality to her thin voice, into our tender embrace. Into the arms of the only family you have left.
Pristoleph looked at her with narrowed eyes under a knitted brow and Phyrea forced herself to turn away from him.
"I don't understand," he said.
She wiped a tear from her eye, and said, "You don't have to... Ransar Pristoleph."
She hoped he smiled at her, but she didn't turn to look.

15_

3 Alturiak, the Year of the Tankard (1370 DR) Third Quarter, Innarlith

Devorast paused to let a wagon laden with empty crates rattle past him. He didn't turn to watch it go and only those few missed steps showed he was aware of its passing at all. When it was out of his way he strode forward, as tall and straight, as confident as always.

The thing that once was Willem Korvan put a hand up on the rough bricks of the tannery, letting only one side of his desiccated face break the plane of the corner, only one dry, stinging eye on his prey.

No, the undead creature thought, not prey. Not yet.

Devorast turned a corner and disappeared from sight. Willem had to look both ways, up and down the dark, quiet street. With middark fast approaching, the streets of the Third Quarter were quiet and all but empty. He watched the wagon trundle off around a curve in the street, and there were no other signs of life. Candles and hearth-fires lit a few of the second story windows, but no faces appeared. No one looked down into the deserted street so late at night.

Willem stepped out from the ink-black alley and crossed the street as fast as he could—in six long strides.

Each footfall sent a stab of pain up from the soles of his feet, through his legs, and into the still, hollow place in his chest where his heart once beat. He hadn't grown accustomed to the pain. Every twinge and jab, every throb and ache, nettled and angered him, reminded him of a time when he could walk without it, speak without it, think without it—but that's all the memory of that time he had.

There were glimpses of faces, dim recollections of desires and ambitions, but all that had been eclipsed, overwhelmed, swallowed up by a single compulsion: to serve his master. And through all that, like a mountain stream through canyons and valleys, ran the pain.

When he looked around the corner of the vacant building Devorast had disappeared behind, Willem saw his prey—no, not prey, he reminded himself again, not yet-crossing the more narrow street several yards ahead. The sound of people laughing, of stories and jokes told too loudly, assaulted his ears. The pain bounced around in his head and he closed his eyes, riding a wave of rage that burned itself out quickly in his dead, defeated spirit.

Devorast went into a tavern, and Willem rushed behind him as fast as his stiff knees would allow. He slipped into a side street when he heard footsteps approach, and while he listened to another man open the tavern door, releasing another wave of voices and—something else ... music?—he turned into an alley. Rats scattered at his approach and one, foolish and brave, perhaps mind-addled with rabies, stopped to hiss at him as he passed. He came around to the back of the tavern then moved to a window that looked out onto the alley on one side.

The sound, strange and alluring—the sound of music-made him blink. He remembered the song but not its name. He liked that song—or he remembered liking it, remembered, vaguely, a time when he was able to form opinions of that kind: like, dislike, love... hate he could still feel. Hate and blind obedience.

He saw Devorast in the tavern, surrounded by happy, living people—happy even though they were simple tradesmen—and Willem reveled in his hatred. It was his hatred that sustained him like the air that used to fill the lungs, which had gone still and empty in his chest.

"Devorast," he whispered, and touched a cold finger to the colder glass. "My friend..."

Devorast approached a table and two men—no, one man and a dwarf—stood to greet him with smiles. He embraced the dwarf in a way that even the dead version of Willem Korvan couldn't believe he'd ever have seen from Ivar Devorast. The dwarf was a spectacle—all hair and grime and the drying crust of stale mead. But they smiled and they embraced.

The other man—Willem recognized him, but the name was distant and unavailable to him—patted Devorast on the back and they sat. The man Willem couldn't remember held up a hand and a barmaid approached with a tray. A man at another table grabbed at her behind as she passed but she didn't notice. Laughter followed.

The music came from a table in the back upon which sat an old man cradling a yarting. Willem closed his eyes and let the music hammer at his ears. He tried to hear what Devorast said to the dwarf and the alchemist—that's right, Willem realized, that's the alchemist—but he couldn't hear. His head throbbed in time with the music and a pain struck him, as though someone had driven a lance through his right calf.

He had pains like that from time to time and had imagined that they were either memories of wounds he'd forgotten in the past, or premonitions of injuries to come.

He imagined that because the truth, that he was rotting and when you rot, it hurts, wasn't something he could think about and remain even as sane as he was. If he let himself understand what had truly happened to him, and what was happening to him with every passing moment, he would become the monster Marek Rymiit had made him.

If he tried to remember that he was Willem Korvan, he would serve the Thayan as long as he had to until he was finally ordered to kill Ivar Devorast, then he would set himself on fire, throw himself from the top of the Palace of Many Spires, or sink himself into the deepest part of the Lake of Steam.

He'd been dead for over a year, but he still had something to live for.

15 Ches, the Year of the Unstrung Harp (1371 DR) The Palace of Many Spires, Innarlith

Iristoleph had lost count of the number of gold trade bars he'd had delivered to the Thayan Enclave in the year he spent holding the Palace of Many Spires hard under siege. The streets around the palace were lined with barricades. Shops and inns had been closed for so long the smarter and wealthier of the owners had since relocated to the edges of the Second Quarter and the less foresighted and more under-funded had simply wandered off, leaving everything behind.

The wemics, surprisingly enough, hadn't participated in any of the looting. That seemed an entirely human affair. Pristoleph, watching from a commandeered building across the street, a high-class brothel he'd made his command center, sent a daily missive by magical sending to Ransar Salatis, who remained holed up in his palace first for days, then tendays, then months, but the only return he ever got was a single prayer to some god Pristoleph had never heard of followed by a very rude suggestion as to where he should store his ambitions. The note had made Pristoleph laugh.

"It is an abomination," the wemic, Second Chief Gahrzig, growled. "We cannot be compelled to war at its side."

The wemic's clawed feet scratched the marble of the grand foyer of the Palace of Many Spires as he circled Pristoleph, his one good eye never leaving the hooded undead thing Marek Rymiit had lent him—free of charge,

no less—for the final assault on the palace. The wemic's left eye had been replaced with a smooth, polished gray stone that gave the leonine creature the appearance of a fanciful statue brought almost entirely to life.

"Patience, Second Chief," Pristoleph cautioned, purposefully not looking at the shambling corpse. "Our goal is at hand. Keep your eye on that."

Pristoleph winced—hoping it didn't show—at that slip of the tongue, but the wemic didn't seem to notice.

The undead thing stared out of the single eye hole cut into its black leather hood in what could only have been the Thayan's attempt at a joke. It saw the world through its left eye, while the wemic that despised it had only his right. The clothes it "wore" were tattered, filthy rags that had been tied around it in places to more resemble bandages than garments. Pristoleph imagined that if even a few of the knots were undone, the thing might unravel entirely. He managed to ignore the smell, but that was more difficult for the wemics.

"Follow me," Pristoleph said to Gahrzig, then glanced at the undead thing and strode across the wide foyer.

He didn't wait to be sure anyone followed him, and he didn't look

back, but he could hear the tap of wemic claws on the marble, and the uneven sliding gait of the animated corpse, behind him.
When he was only a few yards from the wide doors at the other end of the cavernous foyer, the heavy oak panels flew open to reveal a line of archers, kneeling in the doorway, arrows nocked. The men looked bad —emaciated and dirty, afraid and exhausted.
Pristoleph stopped walking, put up a hand, and said, "Wait! I-"
But that was as far as he got before the men in the doorway loosed their arrows. The shafts came at him like a cloud of angry hornets, hissing as they made their way to him and the mercenaries behind him.
One of the arrows would have sunk into his chest-perhaps even his heart—had the magical shield that Marek
Rymiit provided for him not pulled his left arm up, almost against his will, to take the impact. The arrow shattered when it hit the gold-inlaid steel of the shield, falling to the marble tiles in splinters.
Most of the arrows missed their targets, but one sank into the right thigh of the undead man. Goosef lesh rose on the undersides of Pristoleph's arms when he saw the utter lack of response from the dead thing. It stood statue-still, Pristoleph's "Wait," being the last command it had heard.
The wemics were entirely less forgiving.
One took an arrow in his broad chest and struggled to stay on his feet, his black lips curled up over yellow fangs, a low, steady growl rolling from his pain-tightened throat. The wemic next to that one threw a spear, which arced through the air so fast Pristoleph's eyes couldn't follow it. It hit one of the archers in the face. There was an unexpected flash of orange light and in what must have been the barest fraction of an instant, both the spear and the archer's head were simply gone.
The archer next to his headless, twitching companion screamed—a high-pitched, desperate wail that echoed in the lofty chamber—and dropped his bow to run. When he turned, he turned in front of the archer on his other side, who, though shaking and obviously reluctant to hold his ground as the wemics began to charge, loosed his arrow. It passed right through the man's chest, and from the amount of blood that followed it, Pristoleph knew the gurgling, jerking archer would die fast.
"Stop this!" Pristoleph called out.
The wemics were in full charge by then, though, and Pristoleph's order was overwhelmed by their harsh growls and roars, the battle cries of the great cats given voice by creatures with the hands and minds of men. The one who had thrown his spear passed by Pristoleph's shield arm, and the senator saw that the barbarian had his weapon back in

his hand, as though he'd never thrown it. Pristoleph remembered paying the Thayan well for that spear.
Two more arrows found their targets and a pair of wemics stumbled, but only one went down. When the first of the lion-men smashed into the line of archers, he killed two with an axe so sharp it tore through armor and bone as easily as it did flesh. There were only three archers left and they all turned to run, tangling with the guards who had stepped up behind them.
Pristoleph set his jaw and made a fist of his right hand. He had to settle himself before he could speak, and while he did, one of the guards fell to a wemic's halberd and a wemic was wounded in the shoulder by one of the guards' long swords.
"This is a waste!" he shouted. "These men who protect that door serve Innarlith. Stop and let them recognize their new ransar. They are beaten."
But no one heard him. The wemics appeared mad with bloodlust, but Pristoleph knew better. They had engaged their enemy, and they would fight to the death. Blood flew, men screamed, wemics roared, and the massacre seemed to go on for days, though only moments passed. Pristoleph didn't order the undead thing into combat, and it remained content to stand there, the arrow still protruding from its thigh.
"Senator Pristoleph?" Gahrzig said from the doorway when the last of the guards were dead.
Pristoleph nodded, not bothering to chastise the barbarian for doing what he'd been paid to do, but neither did Pristoleph praise their skill at arms. They had lost two of their number and killed eight times that many Innarlans, but to Pristoleph it felt like a defeat.
He stepped through the doorway and into the ransar's grand audience chamber, stepping over the fallen guards to do so. The men were skeletal, as though they hadn't eaten in a tenday, as likely they hadn't.
"We did a good job of starving them out, didn't we?" he asked himself as he saw a line of corpses wrapped in what looked like draperies from one of the palace's many parlors. More than three times the number of men the wemics killed had perished before the gates were forced
open—starved, likely, or fallen to the fevers that inevitably infest a closed space full of desperate, fearful men. "I will spend a long time apologizing for this."
"Or a short time paying for it," the second chief grumbled under his breath.
Pristoleph stopped and looked at Gahrzig, who met his gaze and held it.
"Have I made you so cynical, Gahrzig?" Pristoleph asked. "Have I

infected you with that most human of maladies?"
The wemic's brows furrowed and he couldn't help but show a little fang. It was plain the second chief didn't like the implication, but Pristoleph turned away before anything further could be said.
"These are all house guards," Pristoleph said, not happy about changing the subject, but there was a certain time pressure involved. "There are no black firedrakes."
"He's saving them for his private chambers, no doubt," Gahrzig suggested.
"You," Pristoleph said to the undead thing, which gave no indication it knew it was being addressed in any way. "Come with me."
Regardless of the Red Wizard's caution to keep the undead thing away from the black firedrakes, Pristoleph made the decision right then that the first to fall to the strange creatures—monsters that could take the form of men, or men who could take the form of monsters—that comprised Salatis's private guard would be the thing that was already dead.
The wemics drew back as it shuffled past them, then fell into step a few paces behind for the long, tense walk through the palace. As they passed through the wide corridors, the household staff, who had been locked in with Salatis when the siege began, threw themselves at Pristoleph's feet—dirty, starving, and relieved that, even if they were killed for their loyalty to the outgoing ransar, at least it would be over—then they just as quickly scurried away, cowering under the fierce stares of the wemics.
By the time they'd climbed the many flights of stairs to the upper reaches of the palace, Pristoleph felt as though he was walking in a dream. Everywhere they should have met resistance, they found nothing. No arrows, crossbow bolts, or gouts of magical flame came from any of the well-concealed murder holes, and no acid-spitting black firedrakes manned the various blind spots in curving stairways designed for just such an ambush. They arrived at the doors to the ransar's bedchamber entirely unmolested.
Pristoleph stood before the doors with the undead creature on his left side and Gahrzig on his right. He looked at the wemic, who only shrugged. Neither of them were entirely sure how to proceed, though Pristoleph had envisioned that moment for months, if not years.
Not sure why he was doing it even as his hand came up, Pristoleph knocked on the door.
"Enter, Ransar," came a voice from within. The voice was deep, and seemed to rumble from the space beyond the carved mahogany door like thunder. It was not Salatis's voice.
Pristoleph opened the door and the wemics all tensed.
The large room was filled with men in armor as black as their hair.

They looked so much alike they could have all been brothers. They were armed, but their swords were sheathed, and their spears were held point-down. When Pristoleph stepped into the room they went down on one knee in such perfect unison the genasi thought they must have practiced it for days—and maybe they had.
One of them didn't kneel, though. He stepped forward.
"I am Captain Olin," the black firedrake said, and Pristo-lepli recognized his voice as the man who'd bid him enter.
"Captain Olin," Pristoleph said, "are you prepared to surrender?"
The black firedrake smiled in the way parents smile at children who ask where babies come from. He stepped aside and motioned to the floor. The rest of the black-haired, dusky-skinned men parted to reveal the twisted wreckage of a man lying on the scorched wood floor. Only then did
the stench of burned flesh assault his nostrils. The wemics behind him grunted and backed away a step, but Pristoleph stepped forward.
Salatis lay on the floor, melted from the neck down, his head left unscathed by acid so that he could be recognized. A little orange light played around the edges of what was either flesh or some leather strap across the dead man's chest. Pristoleph bent over the corpse, the black firedrakes stepping farther back to give him room. He played a fingertip across the smoldering line and drew away a lick of fire the size of a candle flame. He let it burn from the tip of his finger, and thrilled at the subtle warmth of it. He held it up so that the black-armored guards could see it burn but cause no injury to his half-elemental flesh.
"I claim the palace," he said. "I claim the title Ransar of Innarlith."
The black firedrakes, still kneeling, bowed their heads, and Captain Olin took a knee.
"We serve the ransar," the captain said.
The wemics let up a warbling ululation, but the black firedrakes stayed on one knee until Ransar Pristoleph told them to stand.
"You," he told the hooded undead, "take this back to your master"—he indicated the liquefied corpse of Salatis—"and give him my thanks."
The undead creature shuffled forward and did as it was told.
17_
14 Tarsakh, the Year of the Unstrung Harp (1371 DR) The Canal Site
Excuse me, sir," the stout Innarlan man with the mud-hardened trousers said, his tattered wool cap in his hands.
Surero looked up and scratched his beard. He'd had it for months, but still wasn't used to it.
"Sir?" the man repeated.
Surero nudged Ivar Devorast with an elbow to the ribs and whispered, "He means you, Lord Ditchdigger."

Devorast stopped his steady rhythmic shoveling and looked up at the man, twelve feet up the side of the trench from him. He squinted into the sun and blinked a few times, but otherwise waited to hear what the man had to say.
The man cleared his throat and looked both ways as though afraid of passing carts. He opened his mouth to speak then seemed to think better of it. He set his cap on the edge of the trench and climbed down to the level where Surero and Devorast dug.
"You're him, all right," the man said in a voice that made it plain he was holding back a laugh or some other expression of joy. Surero stood, leaning on his shovel, also working to keep a smile off his face. "They said not to say anything, and I swear by whatever god looks after people who dig holes in the ground that no one will hear your name from these lips."
Devorast nodded and said, "Thank you, Mister... ?"
"No mister, anyway, sir," the man replied, embarrassed. "My name is Fador, and I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."
"What can we do for you?" Surero asked, startling Fador, who looked at him as though just then noticing someone else was there.
"Um, well..." he started, forcing his attention back to Devorast. "Little Lord H"—as the men had come to call Horemkensi—"he's told us to use four inches of sand instead of eight from now on as it's takin' too long using eight inches and he wants us to build faster."
Devorast shook his head, and Surero smiled when he saw no anger or even frustration there. It was as though Devorast had already fixed the problem that had been brought to him.
"It has to be eight inches," he told Fador. "Tell everyone I said so."
"But Little Lord H, sir..." Fador mumbled.
"He'll never know," Surero assured the man. "Likely as not he's already forgotten the order."
Fador smiled at that, still embarrassed. "But if we don't build faster?"
Devorast started digging again and Surero realized that for him, at least, the conversation was over.
"The horses had to be reshod this month," Surero said— the first thing that came to mind. Fador answered with a confused look. "If the horses all have to be reshod the work will slow, even if you used less sand."
"But the horses are fine, Master..."
"Call me Orerus," Surero replied. "Don't actually reshod them, Fador, but your Little Lord H won't know you didn't, will he?"
Fador smiled and nodded. He looked back at Devorast and seemed anxious to say something else, but Devorast just went on digging.
"Thank you, Fador," Surero said.
Fador nodded and scurried back up the trench wall, laughing.

"Well," Surero said to Devorast when Fador was finally out of earshot, "I guess the word is spreading."
Devorast, seeming to reply to an entirely different question, said, "The zombies won't lie about horseshoes."
Surero stood staring at Devorast, who went on digging for some time.
"The zombies..." the alchemist finally said, lifting his shovel to dig. "I've been thinking about that."
18_
3 Mirtul, the Year of the Unstrung Harp (1371 DR) The Sisterhood of Pastorals, Innarlith
Surero didn't mind standing in line with the rest of them for a bowl of soup and a crust of bread. It gave him a chance to look at Halina. She had changed since last he saw her,
some four years before. She had aged, but in a way that flattered her. The tired, almost simpering girl had not so much hardened, but solidified—no, he thought, that is a terrible choice of words to describe a woman so beautiful.
"I'm sorry," he said when finally he stepped in front of her, a dented pewter bowl in his hands.
She looked at him with a curious expression, as though she recognized but didn't remember him.
"You have no need to apologize, Brother," she told him. "The Great Mother smiles on all her—"
"No," he interrupted, blushing when he saw the brief flash of anger that passed through her otherwise forgiving blue eyes. "Now I must say I'm sorry."
He smiled and bowed his head and the hardness was gone from her eyes, replaced once more by a searching gaze.
"Your voice is familiar to me," she said.
"We have spoken before, though it was long ago," Surero said. "I have thought about—"
"Have you thought about other people who might like a bowl of soup, mate?" a pungent old woman who stood three people down from him in line called out. She was answered by a general shuffle and air of impatience.
Halina dropped a ladleful of barley soup into his bowl then turned to one of the younger acolytes behind her and asked, "Would you take my place, please? I must excuse myself for a moment."
The younger woman stepped into her place and took the ladle from her hand without the slightest hesitation. Something in that simple exchange made Surero's heart skip a beat. He couldn't even begin to keep the smile from his face. When she turned and looked at him again, Halina was even more puzzled.
"Why are you smiling?" she asked as she stepped from behind the

table.
He nodded for her to proceed in front of him, and as she led him to a table in the far corner of open courtyard of Chauntea's temple in Innarlith, he replied, "I'm sorry, Sister."
"You apologize a lot," she told him as they sat. "You don't have to call me 'Sister.' My name is Halina."
"Surero," the alchemist replied. He realized that the accent he'd remembered—one he'd heard many times since in his imagination—was, though not gone entirely, softened. He wondered if she had made an effort to lose it, but thought it would be rude to ask.
"And where have we met, Surero?' she asked.
Surero put a hand to his beard and said, "It was four years ago, I believe. You served me soup then, too."
"I serve a lot of soup to a lot of people who have felt the sting of being brushed aside, and the ache of hunger that inevitably follows."
Surero managed to stop smiling when he said, "I hope, Halina, that I can help you now the way you helped me then and help all these people every day."
"I hope so, too, Surero," she said, but he could tell she didn't believe him. Her eyes changed the subject before her words did. "You didn't have a beard then." He blushed and she added, "You look better without it. I should like to see you again without it."
Surero was thankful for that beard when he felt his cheeks blaze with heat. He had to look away, but could still see her smile at him.
"Believe me, Halina," he said, "I would relish the opportunity to remove it."
"Then why don't you?"
"I don't want to be recognized."
Halina let her hands rest on the table and her face grew hard, though he thought she was reluctant to have to look at him like that. "This is a temple, and here you will find peace but not sanctuary. If you are in trouble, and you repent your sins in the name of the Greatmother, we could speak on your behalf to—"
"No," he interrupted again, still blushing. "Please, Sister Halina, no. That's not it. That's not it at all."
"But you disguise yourself?"
"Only to continue working in a place that long ago discharged me," he said.
"Explain yourself," she said. "Then, if it's appropriate for me to help you, I will."
The alchemist took a deep breath and did his best to explain, in the broadest possible terms, how he and Devorast—and he made a point to risk mentioning Ivar Devorast by name—had begun to work in secret not to undermine the efforts of Horemkensi, but to rescue the

canal—and the workers—from his incompetence.
"But try as we might," he finished, "there are some ... workers ... who will not ignore the orders given them by this dangerous incompetent."
Halina took a deep breath and held it. Surero couldn't help but stare at her. She returned the stare with a smile and a long, slow exhale.
"There are more people here than ever, aren't there?" he asked.
Her face serious and solemn, she replied, "More than ever, yes."
"And at the canal site, at the quayside," he whispered, leaning across the table toward her, "more undead."
She closed her eyes at the sound of that last word but didn't back away. Surero still leaned forward. He looked at her, at the smoothness of her skin stretched tight against her high, aristocratic cheekbones, at the simplicity of her, the purity of her. He drank her in.
"If only I could tell you how—" she said, but stopped herself.
"You can help us," he whispered. "You can help us all." She shook her head but said, "Yes." "Will you?"
She closed her eyes and sat very still for a long time, and Surero let her, but he never took his eyes from her face.
"The sisters have discussed this," she said finally, her voice so quiet he barely heard her from scant inches away, "but they are reluctant to take sides in a city so continuously
damaged from people taking sides. And the new ransar—" Again, she stopped herself from completing a thought he could tell was too painful for her, personally, to follow through on. "But I will try."
19_
8Kythorn, the Year of the Unstrung Harp (1371 DR) Third Quarter, Innarlith
Iˆhyrea could see the gleaming minarets of the Palace of Many Spires glittering in the bright sunshine long before her coach passed though the south gate into the city proper. Staring at it gave her at least a lame excuse not to make eye contact with the nameless—at least, he hadn't given her his name—black firedrake Pristoleph had sent to watch over her on her journey from Firesteap Citadel.
The strange man in his black armor held a short spear across his lap. He breathed heavily through his nose-sniffing really more than inhaling—but otherwise made no sound. She thought he smelled of charcoal or brimstone, as though he'd spent long periods of time sitting around a campfire.
The guard didn't look at her, either, his black eyes shifting from one side of the coach to another, determined to catch a sign of an ambush that never came.
Phyrea's neck ached from looking out the window. She sat facing the front of the coach and looked out to her left to see the palace. Looking out the window meant not only that she could avoid making eye

contact with the black firedrake, but she wouldn't have to acknowledge the ghost that sat beside him on the rear-facing bench.
Just because we made it this far, the old woman made of purple light said, doesn't mean we won't still be set upon by Salatis's men.
Phyrea didn't answer aloud. She didn't want the guard to think she was speaking to him. But she wanted to tell
the old woman that the black firedrakes were Salatis's men, and she'd ridden with one all day, thirty-five miles from the citadel. If he were still taking orders from the dead ransar, she would have been dead a log time ago.
Don't be so sure, the old woman said.
Phyrea cringed, drawing, only briefly, the black fire-drake's attention. She thought the smell of charcoal grew stronger for a moment, until he had reassured himself that nothing was wrong.
Phyrea sighed, still staring at the Palace of Many Spires, and the feeling of dread that was always with her welled up in her chest. There was something about the idea of living in the palace that—
The coach turned right at the first opportunity, carrying them farther from the palace, and into the seedy, impoverished Fourth Quarter.
Where are they taking us? the old woman asked, and Phyrea spared the ghost a glance and as subtle a shrug as she could manage.
Pristal Towers, Phyrea realized, not the Palace of Many Spires.
She sighed, relieved, but not sure why she should be.
It could still be a trap, said the old woman. Salatis didn't care about you one way or the other, I think, but this Pristoleph will destroy you, of that you can be sure, and we may not be here to pick up the pieces.
Phyrea answered the ghost by" letting her emotions run unchecked for the length of time it took the coach to weave through the crowded, rutted, dirty Fourth Quarter streets and pause at the gate to Pristal Towers. She hoped that the beings of light and hate indeed wouldn't be there to "pick up the pieces," or to do anything for or to her, ever again. Phyrea further hoped that the ghosts could sense that from her.
The black firedrake insisted on exiting the coach first, and Phyrea let him. She told herself she would have to make herself accustomed to the guards. She was, after all, the wife of the ransar.
A temporary turn of affairs, at best, the ghost of the old woman commented.
As she slid out of the coach Phyrea spared the ghost a smirk. The old woman made no move to exit the coach, and Phyrea briefly thought maybe the old apparition would finally just ride away. But of course she was not nearly so lucky. When she looked up to greet Pristoleph, who waited for her on the broad steps leading to the entrance to his enormous manor home, the old woman stood only a few steps away from him, returning Phyrea's smirk with her own tight-pressed line of

indigo light.
"Phyrea, my love," Pristoleph said, meeting her in the middle of the stairway with a burning embrace and a kiss chaste enough to be appropriate for the eyes of the staff that lined the stairs. "Your journey was safe?"
She returned the embrace and kissed him on the cheek, which almost scalded her lips. "I was well looked after."
Pristoleph glanced over her shoulder and nodded to the black firedrake, who bowed in response then climbed into the coach.
"It has been a long time," Pristoleph whispered in her ear as she looked oyer her shoulder to watch the coach pull away.
"Does he just ride around in there all the time?" she asked with a smile and a playful wink.
Pristoleph returned the smile and said, "No, but he would if I asked him to."
He would have if Salatis had asked him to, too, the little boy with the missing arm said from behind her.
She didn't pay the spirit any mind. Instead, she let Pristoleph lead her up the stairs. She nodded to each of the household staff as they passed, all of whom were gracious enough to smile and pretend they didn't despise her, but she thought she knew otherwise.
"I thought you would never send for me," she said to Pristoleph. "For a while there I imagined myself one of those insipid princesses from a child's tale, locked away in
the highest room of the highest tower, living only to hope that the handsome prince would come to rescue me."
"If you were that princess," he said, "I would be the prince, and not the man who imprisoned you."
Her smile faltered ever so slightly at that, though in her heart she felt that was true.
"Still, it's been so long," she said.
"Not even four months," he replied, as though that wasn't a long time.
"Four months since you became ransar," she said, "but I've been at Firesteap for longer than that."
"Of course," he said, patting her hand, "and for that I am sorry, and I promise that I will spend what remains of my life making it up to you."
"I suppose I should thank you for starting that process by not making me live in the Palace of Many Spires?"
They reached the top of the stairs and he stopped her before they went inside. He held her by the shoulders and looked in her eyes. Her heart warmed in her chest at the way he looked at her.
"I would have thought you'd be angry with me about that," he said.
She put a hand to his fiery cheek and said, "Not at all. I've come to feel

that Pristal Towers is my home, and that wasn't easy for me. The palace would have felt too... temporary."
"It wouldn't have been," he assured her. "It won't be."
She smiled, though she didn't believe that for a second.
I don't believe it, either, said the old woman. / wonder who the Red Wizard will choose next?
He's different, Phyrea replied in her head. Don't underestimate him.
She felt rather than heard the ghosts laugh, but ignored the feeling.
As they passed into the foyer and a butler handed them each a tallglass of her late father's wine, she said, "The city doesn't seem at all changed. It's as though nothing ever happened."
"And it wasn't easy, these last months, making that so," he said after he took a sip of the wine. She thought she heard the cool liquid hiss against his lips. "I've been busy not only restoring the damage done to buildings and streets, but to the hearts and minds of the senate and citizens alike. I think they're already starting to realize that I will be more ... let's say, stable, than some of the previous ransars."
It's not the men themselves, but the position that's unstable, said the man with the scar on his face, and Phyrea had to agree.
"So you will be the great reformer?" she asked.
He laughed as they strolled to a parlor and said, "Eventually, I hope to be, but for the nonce I've been busy putting things back to the way they were before the unfortunate siege."
A siege he instigated, the old woman reminded her.
"Even the canal has been making startling progress," he went on, and Phyrea's flesh crawled at the sound of that word: canal. "It's a wonder, considering it's still in the hands of that barely-functional idiot Salatis put in charge of it."
"Horemkensi?" she asked.
"I hear the workers call him Little Lord H, and have begun to ignore his orders," Pristoleph replied. "Even the zombie workers the Thayan sold them are starting to disappear. What does it say about a man, I have to wonder, if a zombie, magically compelled to do so by a Red Wizard's powerful necromancy, won't even take him seriously?"
Phyrea shook her head and sank into a plush, silk-upholstered sofa. Pristoleph sat next to her, so close she could feel his heat, and he waved the butler away. The servant stepped backward through the double doors, pulling them closed in front of him.
"It has been a long time," he said, setting his tallglass on the little table next to him. He took her glass from her and set it next to his, and looked at her with undisguised lust—fire, even, in his eyes.
Though the word "canal" conjured an image of a man she still knew she loved in a way she could never love her husband, she had missed Pristoleph more than she thought she would, and the heat of him, the

smell of him, his commanding presence surrounded by his seemingly limitless wealth, managed to push Ivar Devorast's face from her thoughts.
"And how may I serve the ransar?" she whispered.
Pristoleph kissed her, burning her mouth with his tongue. As hot as it was, she pressed in harder still.
He pulled only a hair's breadth away from her and said, "This ransar will serve you."
20_
30Eleint, the Year of the Unstrung Harp (1371 DR) The Canal Site
It's true then," the Cormyrean said, and T'juyu, who listened, invisible and unmoving, from behind the canvas rear wall of the tent, sensed more relief than surprise in his voice.
"Warden Truesilver," a man's voice replied—it was the alchemist. T'juyu didn't know his name. "To what do we owe this-?"
"My king is dead," Truesilver interrupted. A silence followed and T'juyu had no idea how to interpret it. "Our king has fallen on the field of battle."
The alchemist cleared his throat and said, "I'm... shocked to hear that, Warden. I'm sorry."
"Devorast?" Truesilver asked.
"He was a good man," Ivar Devorast said. "He was a fair and forthright king."
"I suppose that will suffice as an outpouring of grief for the misery of your homeland," the warden replied. T'juyu wasn't sure if he was being sarcastic.
"Is that what you came here to tell us?" Devorast asked, and from his tone T'juyu could tell he didn't think that was the case.
"Please, Warden, sit," the alchemist said.
There came a rustling and shuffling of feet as the three men settled themselves in the cramped, dark tent. For a while the only sounds were the general murmur of the camp—not too loud with Devorast's tent so far removed from the others—and the croaking of unseen frogs hiding in the tall grass around them. The night sky was devoid of stars and the breeze from the west was cool and damp.
"I heard a rumor that you had returned," the visiting Cormyrean said. "You have taken back your canal, then."
There was another pause then the alchemist said, "Well ... not precisely."
"What do you mean?" asked Truesilver. "I've seen the progress. It's remarkable. This is truly a feat that will be the envy of... well, everyone."
"Horemkensi," Devorast said, "is the master builder."
"Whatever does that mean?"

"It means," said the alchemist, "that as far as anyone who matters in Innarlith knows, Senator Horemkensi is directing the construction of the canal, not Ivar Devorast."
"And I would prefer that that fiction remain in place," Devorast said. "At least for now."
There was another pause, but T'juyu could hear the warden breathing loudly. Finally the Cormyrean said, "That's an outrage. The new ransar is so loyal to this Horemkensi that he wouldn't hear your plea?"
If it was possible to hear someone shrug, T'juyu heard it, or at least sensed it from the alchemist.
"Have you even spoken to him?" Truesilver asked.
"Pristoleph?" the alchemist replied.
"No," said Devorast.
"I've met with him," Truesilver said. "I've just come from Innarlith and plan to ride the rest of the way north to Arrabar. A Cormyrean ship awaits me there so that I can return home... to a kingdom without—"
He stopped speaking and even T'juyu could sense the discomfort in the air.
A footstep startled her and she brushed up against the canvas. Feet shifted inside, but T'juyu looked up at the sound of another footstep outside, then another. A man carrying a short spear and wearing ring mail that looked at least a size too big for him passed. He looked and smelled drunk—only a little—but he still seemed determined to make his rounds.
T'juyu held her breath. Of course she could kill the guard, but then there would be a dead or missing guard, and the canal site would be placed on watch. The men in the tent would suspect that it was an assassin that had brushed their tent, and they would only be partly mistaken.
"Is someone there?" the alchemist called.
"Ahoy there," the guard called back, teetering a bit as he came to a stop not half a yard from the invisible T'juyu.
"Is that you, Reety?" the alchemist responded from inside the tent.
"Aye," the guard, who must have been a sailor before hiring on to guard the canal site, said around an airy belch. "It's just me."
"On your way, then," Devorast said, and Reety moved on.
T'juyu didn't risk a sigh.
"So," Truesilver continued. "You should speak to Ransar Pristoleph."
"I don't need Pristoleph's permission to do what I'm doing," Devorast said. "And besides, his wife would never allow it."
"His—?" the Cormyrean started.
"It's complicated," the alchemist covered. "I hope we can leave it at that."
Truesilver sighed loudly and T'juyu sensed that the three of them

would leave the conversation there, and so it was her cue to leave. As she made her way as quietly as she could away from the tent, she heard a shuffle of parchment or paper from within and Truesilver said, "These are interesting. The way the teeth on these wheels..."
Then his voice was lost to the night, and so was T'juyu.
21
2Marpenoth, the Year of the Unstrung Harp The Canal Site
Though she had spent only a short time in the company of humans, T'juyu had gotten to know much about them. Within the first few heartbeats after stepping into the little clapboard shack that Senator Horemkensi called home, she knew he would be easy to get close to, and all she had to do was get close.
"Well, now," the man said, his voice throaty and not unpleasant, "what do we have here?"
T'juyu smiled and pulled the door closed behind her, letting her gaze dart across the confines of the cabin, reassuring herself that they were alone.
"What is your name?" he asked, his smile matching hers, his teeth bright, his eyes dull.
"T'juyu," she said, using a simple cantrip to make her voice higher, almost squeaky. She knew that sort of thing put human males off their guard.
The senator sat at a small table on which was set a silver service and a half-finished meal T'juyu didn't like the smell of. She knew that by brutish, human standards the man was considered handsome. His clothes were all silk and soft linen, his black leather boots so shiny T'juyu could see the curve of her own hip reflected in the uppers.
"Ah," he breathed, "where are my manners?"
He rose but didn't approach her. She made a sound she'd come to know as a "giggle" and it seemed to please him.
"You're Senator Horemkensi?" she asked. She knew who he was, but still she felt she had to be sure. She had to hear him at least admit to who he was, if not what he'd done.
The senator dipped into a low bow, sweeping his arm down as he went and said, "At your service, fair lady."
"And there was to be someone else," she said, brushing an errant hair from her forehead, though her hair was short, almost like a man's. She'd tried it long but hated the feeling of it brushing her shoulders—not to mention the feeling of having shoulders in the first place. "Harkhuf?"
Horemkensi blinked and said, "Alas, he is in Innarlith on an urgent errand. But what could we two possibly require of him?"
T'juyu fought not to let her disappointment show. No matter, she thought. She had the head, so what of the fate of the tail?

"You have very lovely skin," the man said, leaning against the little table, his meal forgotten. "Where are you from?"
"The Chondalwood," she said, not even bothering to lie.
He didn't seem to have heard her anyway, as though he had asked the question but had no interest in any answer.
"What brings you to my door this evening, T'juyu?" he asked, and she was surprised that he'd remembered her name. "All this way from the city..."
"Not what," she replied, "but who."
He raised an eyebrow, waiting for more.
"I am a gift, my lord," she said, pleased that she managed not to choke on calling him that. "I was sent by Ransar Pristoleph with his thanks for your efforts on the city-state's behalf."
Horemkensi burst out laughing and brought his hands together in front of him with a loud slapping noise that startled her.
"That old scoundrel," he said. "And here I was worried that that street urchin cum king was going to have me sent home in disgrace, if not killed."
"But you have done so well here. The whole city is talking about it," she said, and again it wasn't easy for her to keep up the pretense. She knew full well that it was another who had brought the growing canal back from the brink of disaster.
He stopped laughing, but smiled still and nodded. He took his eyes away from her and she took that opportunity to move closer to him in just a few small steps. He didn't look up when she stood only inches in front of him. His eyes traveled up her legs slowly, then lingered in her middle. Uncomfortable in the rough fabric anyway, she let her simple woolen gown fall from her shoulders. He drew in a breath.
"You like what you see?" she asked. "My form pleases you?"
"My compliments to the ransar," he whispered.
And something about that, and the way he said it, drove the last sliver of patience from T'juyu. She couldn't wait for the man to look her in the eye on his own accord. He obviously had no interest in her eyes or her face. He reached out to touch her and she let him, forcing herself to lean in closer. With the tip of one finger under his chin she drew his face up to meet hers. He smiled playfully and she thought again how handsome he was, but how dull and lifeless were his eyes.
She stared deeply into those dull orbs and held him, reaching out with her gaze, then with her mind, then with a power that rose up from the core of her being like a tide slowly rising under the gentle but relentless influence of Selune.
T'juyu wasn't the slightest bit surprised when the man fell under her spell. She robbed him of the ability to move.
"Don't be afraid, Little Lord H," she whispered into his still, confused

face. "To be quite honest, this is more about me than it is about you."
He could hear her, she knew that, but she didn't get the feeling he quite understood what was happening to him, let alone what was about to happen.
"I came from the Chondalwood," she told him, "because the water nagas had made an arrangement that made my kind very, very nervous. We don't like water nagas, you see. But then I spent some time listening, some time understanding, and it's occurred to me that, despite how this hole
in the ground might benefit the naja'ssynsa it seems I was on the wrong side."
He tried to shake his head, to tell her he didn't understand, not to break the eye contact that held him rigid and helpless before her. The spell wouldn't let him look away.
"You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?" she asked.
His eyes told her she was right.

"That," she whispered into his ear, letting the eye contact break, "is only one of the reasons why I'm killing you."
He started to move, but only the slightest twitch before T'juyu let her fangs grow out from her human gums. The long, needle-like teeth sank deeply into the warm, soft flesh of his neck and she let her venom pour into him.
22_
3 Marpenoth, the Year of the Unstrung Harp (1371 DR) The Palace of Many Spires, Innarlith
Oh.. . oh, Ransar..." the alchemist babbled as he was hustled into the lavish sitting room by one of Pristoleph's black firedrakes. "Please, my lord, oh, please allow me to explain. I beg you. I didn't think... I mean, I didn't realize ... I don't know ..."
He doesn't know what he's defending himself against, Pristoleph thought, rolling his eyes.
The black-armored soldier let go of Harkhuf's arm and the alchemist dropped to his knees, his green-stained hands shaking and scrabbling at the fine Calishite rug. He was dressed in dingy gray undergarments and a tattered weathercloak. His face was sweating and great brown stains showed under his arms. From the state of his hair and the redness in his eyes it was obvious that the black firedrakes had roused him from a sound sleep. It was well after middark after all.
"Calm yourself," Pristoleph said, but the groveling man hardly seemed to hear him.
"Harkhuf, really," Marek Rymiit scolded, almost as though Harkhuf were his own unruly child.
It was only then that Harkhuf seemed to notice that the Red Wizard was in the room. He scrambled to his feet and crossed to where Marek sat and Pristoleph could see his knees bending ever more with each step.
"There is no need to bow to me, Harkhuf my friend," the Thayan said, and Pristoleph imagined his next words might have been: "At least not in the presence of the ransar," but the Red Wizard left that unsaid.
"Sit down, man," Pristoleph said, taking a seat himself on a particularly garish, massive wingback easy chair of Waterdhavian design.
Harkhuf took two steps on weak knees and collapsed on a foot stool in front of Marek, looking for all accounts like a dog caught soiling his master's rug.
"I assume we had to wake you, this evening?" Pristoleph said.
"Oh, oh, no, Ransar, no, not at all. Not at all," the alchemist replied around a hissing, toadying laugh that made Pristoleph's skin crawl. Marek rolled his eyes behind the alchemist's head.

"Since you were sleeping," Pristoleph pressed on, "I will assume you have not yet heard of the death of Senator Horemkensi."
"The ... what?" Harkhuf said. If it was possible for his face to get any whiter, it did just then. "The what... of... who? Who died?"
"You heard him," Marek said.
Harkhuf tried to look at both of them at the same time and appeared almost more regretful of having sat between them than he was of the word of his master's death.
"How?" he asked in a voice as small as a little girl's.
"He was murdered," Pristoleph said.
"Poisoned," Marek added.
"No," Harkhuf whispered, his bloodshot eyes bulging. "Oh, blessed Azuth, you can't possibly believe that I had anything—" He threw himself to the floor, pushing the foot stool toward a startled Red Wizard, and commenced a most unseemly groveling. "Oh, Ransar, I beg you. I beg you to hear my defense. I was not even there when it happened. I know nothing of poisons. I know even less of poisons than I do of smokepowder. I would never ... I would never..."
"Will you please calm yourself," Pristoleph said. "And get up off the floor."
Harkhuf did as he was told, hurrying to a small chair in the corner of the parlor, where he sat with his green hands at his sides. He was having a great deal of difficulty breathing.
"By the gods," Marek said, "you'll pass out."
"No one here is accusing you of anything," Pristoleph said.
That stopped Harkhuf breathing all together.
"Breathe," the Red Wizard urged.
Harkhuf took a deep breath and nodded. He blinked and for a moment Pristoleph thought he was about to pass out, but finally he managed to gather himself—at least enough to remain conscious.
"It was the Zhentarim," the alchemist said.
Pristoleph looked at the Thayan and met his eyes.
"The Black Network?" Marek asked.
"Yes," the alchemist said, though he shook his head at the same time. "It was the merchant's council of Turmish, then. Yes?"
"Do you—?" Pristoleph started to ask.
"The caravanners!" the alchemist exclaimed. "Our own caravanners... they've opposed construction of the canal all along!"
"So, you're guessing," Marek said with a dark, perturbed look.
"I was hoping you could tell me more," Pristoleph said
with a sigh. "The two of you seemed close. And together you've made remarkable progress, or so I've been told."
"Yes," the alchemist said, looking down at the rug between his unshod feet. "I haven't the slightest clue as to how or why, my lord, but we

have made exceptional progress."
"Whatever do you mean, you have no clue how or why?" asked Marek.
"I'm terrible, my lords," the alchemist said to both the ransar and the Red Wizard. "I haven't the foggiest idea what I'm doing. By my own count I've killed two hundred men ... more, maybe ... and all that with smokepowder still left over from Surero. When I told the men to make some more they looked at me in a way that made it plain they had no idea where to begin, and yet within a tenday, the supplies were almost entirely restocked."
Again Pristoleph traded a look with Marek.
"You mean you haven't been—?"
"Doing much at all, Ransar," Harkhuf admitted. "Please, Master Rymiit... I should be discharged. I am incompetent and I have failed you over and over and over again."
"And now," Pristoleph grumbled, "the senator who's been covering for you is dead, and you're afraid whoever killed him will come after you next."
"Master Rymiit," Harkhuf said, a little drool beginning to drip from his quivering lower lip. "Something is happening to the zombies. Every so often some of them disappear. They just... aren't there anymore. We ... I have no idea what's become of them."
An angry scowl darkened the Red Wizard's face even more, and Pristoleph found his pulse beginning to race. The other two men looked up at him and blinked, and he realized he'd inadvertently raised the temperature in the room enough for them to notice. He calmed himself, but it took a while for the room to cool.
Marek took the hint, though, and calmed himself as well. Harkhuf was one of Marek's -men, at least after a fashion, and the Red Wizard was not someone a man like
Harkhuf should ever disappoint. Pristoleph hoped only for a little more information from the alchemist, then he'd do what ransars often did: turn a blind eye while Marek Rymiit did what he thought was best.
"I don't want to go back up there," Harkhuf said. "I beg you not to compel me to do so. I beg you both."
"You will go where your ransar commands you to go," Marek warned.
"It was not Horemkensi, then," Pristoleph said, "who was responsible for the increase in productivity."
Harkhuf shook his head and replied, "It could have been, but..."
"But?" the Thayan prompted.
"But only over the past couple months I began to notice that when he gave an order, it looked as though the men meant to carry it out, but often went off and did something else entirely. It was as though they knew he was wrong, and to a man knew what to do instead."

"Or someone else was telling them what to do," Pristoleph said.
Harkhuf replied, "All I know is it wasn't me."
23_
4Marpenoth, the Year of the Unstrung Harp (1371 DR) Third Quarter, Innarlith
Just enough of Willem Korvan's mind was functioning for him to realize that the roar of the heavy, incessant rain would mask his shuffling footsteps as well as it masked his odor. That, and a cunning he didn't remember from his days as a living man, kept him behind but in sight of his quarry.
Though he had followed people before—Ivar Devorast and others—it wasn't too often that he was commanded to track someone but not kill him. But as he shadowed the shivering, stumbling alchemist through the dark streets
of the Third Quarter, it was not for the purpose of ending the man's life but of protecting it.
"He has use to me," Marek Rymiit had told him as the sun set that evening. "Limited use, to be certain, but I would prefer him alive. Let him wander, though, to flush out the assassin. The assassin, I want dead."
Willem set out to find the alchemist that night because he had no choice. Even if he tried to will it, he couldn't resist the commands of his master. He existed only as a tool for the Red Wizard, and perhaps the same tiny fragment of what was left of the living man that made him thankful for the concealing rain, made him wish his death would finally be complete and he could be free of the Thayan, and free of the reality of what he had become.
The alchemist passed a tavern and seemed about to enter, but when two men, drunkenly propping each other up as they splashed into the street, burst out of the door, he turned in his tracks and scurried away. The drunkards paid him no heed, but as they passed the entrance to the alley in whose impenetrable shadows Willem lurked, their sodden, moaning song quieted, and their eyes twitched with instinctive nervousness.
Willem let them pass and soon their voices regained their ale-inspired confidence and were lost to the drumming rain.
After a few more twists and turns Willem lost his way. He still had the alchemist in front of him, but none of the buildings around him were familiar. The dark streets wound like a maze, or like a mass of writhing snakes, and like snakes seemed to constantly change their shape. But it didn't matter where he was, only that the man he'd been told to watch was still in sight.
He smelled the pigs before he heard them, and even that was a long time before he rounded the corner of a low brick building and saw the

animals. The pen sat next to a slaughterhouse, and the pigs were half-buried in mud, sleeping huddled together, painfully oblivious to the fate
that would soon befall them. Willem didn't have time to think about how lucky those pigs were that their masters granted them a quick death.
The alchemist stopped, his hand resting on the wooden fence that formed the pig pen. It wasn't until Harkhuf took one slow, deliberate step backward that Willem knew for certain that the assassin had presented himself.
Harkhuf put his hands up and took another step backward, but stopped in the middle of a third step. He spoke to someone Willem couldn't see, someone who stood around the corner of the slaughterhouse so that the three of them made the points of a triangle, and only Harkhuf could see both Willem and the assassin.
Willem moved closer, leaving any pretense of hiding behind him. He stepped out into the street.
The alchemist didn't hear or sense his approach, but the pigs did. They smelled him, even in the rain. They stirred, and one by one began to stand, their flat noses wriggling in the air, expelling rain water with every other breath.
"Please," the alchemist called to the darkness in front of him. "Just let me go home."
Willem sensed something wrong in the way Harkhufs voice trailed off. The man stood still as stone, caught in midstep. Something told Willem to move faster, that if he didn't put himself between the assassin and the alchemist fast, he would fail his master.
Willem stepped over the low wooden fence. He sank ankle-deep in the muck that covered the floor of the pigsty, but it didn't slow him much. As he passed along the wall of the slaughterhouse, making for the far corner, the pigs grew increasingly agitated, nudging each other out of the way, all of them trying to flee the thing they instinctively knew was a dangerous, unnatural abomination.
One was too slow or too weak to push its way into the mass of porcine bodies in front of it, and it was stuck in Willem's path. Willem reached down and swatted it away.
The pig, which must have weighed well over two hundred pounds, came off the ground as though it didn't weigh an ounce. It fell on top of its brothers, squealing, bleeding, but alive—at least for the time being. Though it would take a moment for it to show, the other pigs seemed to sense that their unlucky fellow was diseased, and they tried as hard to avoid it as they did Willem.
Had he made that ruckus on purpose? He didn't know— at least, he didn't let himself think about it lest the Red Wizard could read his

mind—but the disturbed pigs drew the attention of the assassin.
Willem saw only the curve of a woman's hip, then a hand, and a blast of orange flame poured over him.
The pain was dull, barely there, but the sensation Willem felt was something different, something the living don't have a name for. He screamed, and felt sheets of dried skin flake away in his throat. The rags he wore blazed, curled, blackened, then went out under the force of the steady downpour. Had it not been raining, the fire might well have destroyed him.
When he could see again, he found he'd not stopped walking forward, and he nearly fell over the fence at the other end of the pig pen. The assassin came around the corner again and grunted in surprise to see Willem so close to her.
She was, like anyone who bothered to go out that night, drenched from head to toe. Her clothing was plastered to her, showing every curve of her body, but the sight stirred nothing in Willem—nothing like it would have when he still breathed. All he saw was the assassin he'd been commanded to kill.
"Stand back," she said, her voice haughty and commanding, but it had no effect at all on Willem. "Who are you?"
"Your executioner," he growled.
She stepped back, waving her hands in front of her. Afraid of another blast of flames, Willem lunged at her, knocking one hand away and raking across her breast with his
claws. She hissed in pain and skipped back away from him, her spell ruined.
"Is this man really worth it to you?" she asked. "Just look at me."
Willem looked at her but didn't stop moving toward her. She locked her eyes on his and swayed on her feet, but Willem came on any way. When she found her back pressed up against the wall on the other side of the alley, her eyes widened in fear.
"Yes," he told her, "you should be afraid."
He threw a fist out at her, but she fell into a crouch and Willem's hand crashed into the bricks behind her, passing straight through in a clatter of stony fragments and a puff of mortar-turned-dust.
She slipped away from him to the side, and by the time he'd wrestled his hand free of the wall and turned to look at her, she had changed.
Gone was the slight woman with dark brown skin and eyes to match, and in her place was a snake of monstrous proportions, in every way a serpent, but with the head of the same woman. The chocolate skin had turned to a pastel violet, and even in the sparse light from neighboring windows her myriad tiny scales shimmered in a thousand rainbows of a thousand colors each. If Willem hadn't been too far gone to appreciate beauty, the sight of the creature would have stopped him

cold—stopped him like the alchemist had been stopped.
Her voice sounded much the same but had taken on an echoing, sibilant quality. He didn't recognize the language she spoke, but knew as soon as the slivers of blue-green energy slammed into his chest that it had been the incantation for a spell.
Willem staggered back, and again there was that sensation that wasn't pain so much as a vague realization that he was in some way injured.
When he stepped back, the creature slithered forward, her jaws open wider than any human would have been
capable of, and thin fangs like gently-curved needles dripped caustic venom into the rain.
Willem didn't actually care if she bit him, so he let her come in and raked her again with his jagged claws. The feeling of her flesh was strange to him, and the scales left miniscule cuts on his desiccated fingers. But she screamed at the injury, and she bled. The wound he'd already given her was starting to show signs of festering—four long furrows high on her serpentine body, going brown and yellow at the edges.
Willem hit her again and dug some flesh out from under her scales. Her fangs latched onto his shoulder and he could feel the poison dribble through his dead flesh and just sit there. There was no blood for it to mingle with, and the veins that would have brought it to his heart and his head had long since shriveled to the consistency of brittle twine.
He clawed her again and the iridescent creature withdrew, slithering backward, twitching and spasming from the pain.
"What are you?" She hissed at him. "You undead thing. You shambling horror. What are you?"
Willem didn't have a word for what he was, so he didn't say anything. He moved relentlessly toward her, and though she did her best to fend him off, tried again to cast a spell, the fact that he didn't care if he "lived" or died kept him pressing ever forward.
"I didn't kill him," the creature gasped. "It was Devorast's all along, and I'm glad I didn't kill him. Tell your master that."
Finally the rot caught up to her and she collapsed into a deep puddle.
"You should kill Harkhuf, too," she said. "He doesn't deserve to..."
The alchemist screamed—a shrill, girlish sound—and the creature opened her mouth, closed her eyes, and choked out her last breath into the pouring rain.
The alchemist screamed again, and Willem looked over at him. He met the man's gaze, and Harkhuf promptly
collapsed onto the cobblestones. Willem could smell the urine that drenched his already rain-soaked trousers.
When Willem turned back to the creature she had already begun to

dissolve. Her body sagged in on itself, rotting from the inside out as though she'd been dead for a month, then a year, then all that was left of her was a dull gray dust that was scattered by the rain and driven into the mud of the pigsty.
"Go home," Willem said to Harkhuf, but the alchemist lay on the street quivering, staring at him in open-mouthed horror.
Willem stood there for a few moments before he finally picked up the alchemist, who fell into an uneasy faint, and carried the man home.
24_
SMarpenoth, the Year of the Unstrung Harp
(1371 DR)
The Canal Site
By Thard Harr's belt-bustin' gut," Hrothgar growled at the gray sky, "I think I might be gettin' used to all this constant drippin'."
Surero smiled at the wet dwarf, his long beard pasted to his leather apron. His boots were sunk as much as an inch deeper into the mud than Surero's, though the alchemist had two feet in height on the stonemason from the Great Rift.
"Careful, there, Hrothgar," the dwarfs distant cousin Vrengarl warned. "Sayin' things like that out loud in front of all these humans... people'll think you've gone soft."
Hrothgar puffed out a scoffing laugh and said, "Then they'll see how soft my boot is when I stick it up their—"
Surero looked up when the dwarf stopped speaking. Hrothgar had lifted one foot out of the mud, and the deep brown dirt fell off it in clumps.
"Well, maybe that wouldn't feel so hard after all," he said.
The two dwarves shared a loud, raucous laugh, and Surero joined them, only a little more quietly. He'd been uneasy since word had begun to filter through the camp of the murder of Horemkensi.
Devorast, who worked at Surero's side at that very moment, measuring the depth of the holes they dug in the wet ground to set kegs of smokepowder, had refused to discuss the murder in detail. Surero knew that Devorast hadn't arranged the man's death, though by all rights he should have. And something about that made the crime all the more disturbing to Surero.
Whoever had killed Horemkensi likely had his eye on the canal, either to seize control of the construction, or to once again put a stop to it. Either way, it would interfere with their work, and whoever this new player was, surely he wouldn't be as easy to fool as Horemkensi had been.
Surero had suggested that Devorast step up and publicly reclaim the realization of his own genius, but that, at least as of yet, didn't happen. Devorast seemed maddeningly content just to do the work,

leaving the credit to whomever was in that position upon its completion.
"That's deep enough," Devorast said, standing and flicking mud off his hands.
"Well, let us get out of here before you bring in that smokepowder," Hrothgar insisted. "That boomin' o' yours hurts my delicate ears."
"And we wouldn't want you to have any trouble listenin' to yourself whine, now would we?" Vrengarl shot back.
"How Tsout we test the hardness of my muddy boots on your disrespectful arse, eh?" Hrothgar said as the two dwarves scrambled up the muddy side of the shallow trench.
"You can try," Vrengarl replied, "but let's do it back at camp. I'm hungry."
The dwarves complained and threatened and harrassed each other until they finally crested a hill and disappeared
from sight. Devorast watched them go with a strange expression.
"Is something—?" Surero began, but Devorast held up a hand to silence him. He was listening, and Surero did the same.
All the alchemist heard was the rumble of the rain pounding the saturated ground.
Devorast reached out, grabbed Surero's arm,' and pulled him down into the mud. The alchemist gasped, then spat dirty water out of his mouth. He almost spoke, then he heard it—a leathery rustle.
A bird, he thought, but a big one. Too big.
Surero looked up into the driving rain, squinting, but the clouds were low and dark, and he couldn't see anything above them. The sound was gone anyway.
"What is it?" he whispered to Devorast, who drew the long knife he'd taken to carrying—more as a tool than a weapon. Surero had nothing like a weapon himself.
"I think you will find," a stern, deep voice came from above them, "that you will live longer if you throw the knife away and submit."
Surero saw Devorast wince at the sound of that word, "submit," then he looked up to the lip of the trench, which was only a few inches above his head. A man dressed entirely in black armor, with a long black weathercloak fluttering in the wind, stood looking down at them. His long sword was sheathed at his belt, and his hands were at his side, hanging loose, but Surero could feel a tension there, and he knew that the man could draw and strike in the blink of an eye.
"You are Ivar Devorast," the man said.
Devorast stepped away from the wall of the trench to get a better look at the man, and Surero heard the flapping of wings again. On the other side of the trench, only a few yards away, a strange creature like a tiny black dragon—tiny for a dragon, but still a bit larger than the

biggest man Surero had ever seen—alit in the mud and stared at them with smoldering red eyes that glowed in the dim light.
More black figures emerged from the rain, some human, some not.
"We're surrounded," the alchemist breathed.
The man in black laughed—a cold, humorless sound— and said, "Indeed. Master Devorast... the knife?"
"Ivar?" Surero said. His hands started to shake, then his knees. He couldn't make himself decide if he wanted Devorast to drop the knife and "submit," or lunge at the man in black and fight for their lives.
Devorast tossed the knife away without a word, and it sank halfway in the mud on the floor of the trench. The black monster on the other side of the trench ruffled its wings and gnashed its teeth, and Surero couldn't help thinking the thing was disappointed.
"I am Captain Olin of the ransar's black firedrakes," the man in the black armor said. "I have come on the orders of Ransar Pristoleph to place you both under arrest for the murder of Senator Horemkensi."
Surero's heart sank and his hands began to tingle and go numb.
Don't faint, he told himself. Do what Ivar does.
Devorast heaved a tired sigh, seemed not the slightest bit surprised, and said nothing.
"We didn't kill him," Surero heard himself say, then he coughed and clenched his teeth together hard.
"I don't care," said Captain Olin.
25
15 Nightal, the Year of Wild Magic (1372 DR) Pristal Towers, Innarlith
TRie jailer dragged Devorast from his cell, but in only a few steps, the prisoner's legs got under him and they walked side by side. At the end of the short, dark corridor, the jailer rapped on a steel door, which was opened from the other side by one of the guards. The guard grabbed Devorast by his filthy, sacklike gown and pulled him through into a little room lit by smoking candles. A line of buckets sat on the floor. The jailer barked an order at Devorast, who hesitated then saw the buckets and pulled off the tattered garment. The time it took him to disrobe betrayed the stiffness in his arms and shoulders, but his face remained stern and impassive.
The jailer lifted a bucket and threw the contents—water that from Devorast's reaction must have been ice cold—into the prisoner's face. Devorast shook, but stood and took two more buckets before he began to scrub at his pale skin, his elbows and shoulders still stiff and slow. When they'd thrown the last bucketful of water at him, Devorast appeared disappointed. The jailer handed him a rag barely less filthy than the discarded gown, but Devorast did his best to dry himself with it without getting any dirtier than he still was. Next he was handed

trousers and a tunic, which he pulled on with a touch more fluidity of movement.
"He looks awful," Wenefir said.
Pristoleph sighed, and still watching the scene that played out in the crystal ball in front of him, said, "You
wouldn't look much better yourself, considering how long he's been in there."
"Was it long enough?"
Pristoleph watched the silent image of the clothed Devorast being dragged from the room, then stepped to a different crystal ball, which had been set on an ornate stand in one of the rooms of his mazelike suite of offices. He'd "rescued" the crystal balls from the Palace of Many Towers and—for a substantial fee, of course—had had them retuned for him by one of Marek Rymiit's wizards. The new crystal ball showed him a long, steep stairway lit by torches. The jailer led Devorast up, and Pristoleph was happy but still surprised to see that Devorast's hands were unbound, just as the ransar had ordered.
"Was it long enough?" Pristoleph repeated. "I'd say it was long enough for an innocent man."
Wenefir shrugged.
Devorast and the jailer passed out of the view of the crystal ball and Pristoleph stepped away, turning to one of the four doors—one on each of the square room's walls.
"Shall I attend?" asked Wenefir.
Pristoleph paused at the door and thought about it for a moment, then turned to his old friend and said, "I don't think so, no."
"I will not be far away, should you need me, my ransar," the priest said with a scowl.
"Thank you, Seneschal," Pristoleph replied with a grin that Wenefir didn't return.
Pristoleph passed through the door and into a room that had been cleared of all furniture. There was another door on the opposite side and the window on the wall to his right had been bricked up. A single glowball, again purchased from the Thayan Enclave, lit the room. In the middle of the floor was a circle of polished stones, each of which glowed with a diffuse light.
Pristoleph took a deep breath when he felt the hair on his arms begin to stand on end. He blinked at the flash
of blue light that announced Devorast's arrival. The man stood in his borrowed clothes, in the middle of the circle of stones, blinking and looking around himself, taking in the bare walls, then letting his eyes settle on Pristoleph.
"Welcome, Master Devorast," Pristoleph said. "Please, step out of the circle."

Devorast stepped over the stones and looked back over his shoulder.
"Another of the little toys I've acquired from the Thayan," Pristoleph explained, though he knew he didn't have to.
"Where am I?" Devorast asked.
His voice was strong and full, though from his appearance Pristoleph had expected something less voluminous—as thin, anyway, as the man himself.
Pristoleph walked across the room, passing close to the man but otherwise ignoring him until he reached the other door and pulled it open.
"This way, please," the ransar said then stepped through the door without waiting to see if Devorast followed him.
The sitting room was comfortable, but not as garish as the more "public" rooms of Pristal Towers. The artifacts and art were from the far corners of Faerun, the furniture upholstered in Shou silk, the carved sandstone that surrounded the fireplace imported from Zakhara. Pristoleph went to a delicately crafted cart made from what looked like spun gold and poured himself a glass of Sembian wine.
"Would you like one?" he asked Devorast.
When Pristoleph turned he saw that Devorast had stepped to the tall, arched window that looked out over the city, facing west.
"Pristal Towers," the ransar said. "Welcome to my home."
"Am I free to go?" the man asked, still looking out at a sky he hadn't seen in a very long time.
"Are you refusing my hospitality?"
"I have been your guest for..."
"Fourteen months," Pristoleph said.
"What more could you wish of me?"
Pristoleph took a long sip of wine and said, "It's quite good, really. Are you sure you wouldn't like a glass?"
Devorast nodded, and the gesture betrayed impatience. Pristoleph made sure to take his time pouring the wine, but Devorast made no complaints. Instead, he continued to stare out the window.
"The city hasn't changed much in fourteen months, has it?" Pristoleph said, stepping to the window and holding out the tallglass.
"No," Devorast said as he took the glass. "It has not changed at all."
Pristoleph smiled at the subtext apparent in Devorast's cold gaze. He sat and motioned for Devorast to do the same. Devorast lowered himself with a barely-audible grunt onto the divan across from Pristoleph.
"There we are," said the ransar. "Now we can converse like two gentlemen."
"I am not a gentleman, Ransar," Devorast said. "You may be, but I am a prisoner."

"You are no longer a prisoner."
"Then I am free to go?"
Pristoleph nodded, but Devorast did not stand.
"I imagine you're curious as to the state of the canal," Pristoleph said.
Devorast replied, "Only if there is something I can do about it."
"Well," said the ransar, "I do hope so. Progress over the last fourteen months has been deplorable. They're barely farther than they were when you were first detained."
"And so you've dug me out of the hole you buried me in so I can finish it?"
Pristoleph found himself smiling, though by all rights he would never have allowed such impertinence from someone in Devorast's position. But the truth of the Cormyrean's words gave him some leeway.
"I've dug you out of your hole because I know you didn't
kill anyone," Pristoleph said. "At any rate, I know you didn't kill Senator Horemkensi." "And Surero?"
"Your friend is being released and sent on his way even as we speak."
Devorast nodded and Pristoleph knew that was as much of a "thank you" as he was ever going to get—and maybe more of one than he deserved.
Pristoleph took another sip of wine, noticing that Devorast hadn't touched his, then he said, "Though I know you didn't kill him, I do know that you made him ... well, let's say a sort of 'cuckold' for some months while you led the construction of the canal in secret. Do you deny that?"
Devorast looked him in the eye and took his first sip of wine.
"Let's say that was worth fourteen months," Pristoleph said. "Just to keep up appearances, you understand."
Devorast took another sip of wine.
"There's something I have been waiting some months to ask you," Pristoleph said.
"You knew where to find me."
Pristoleph laughed, ignoring the part of himself that told him he should have been offended, and said, "Indeed. At any rate, I wonder if you can tell me now—why?"
Devorast lifted an eyebrow.
"Why would you work so hard to finish a canal that Little Lord H would have gotten all the credit for? Why help him? Why build it in the first place if so many people, so many powerful people, especially since the death of Osorkon, were aligned against you?"
"You wouldn't understand."
And from that answer, Pristoleph understood everything. He set his tallglass on the table between them and rubbed his hands together so Devorast wouldn't see them shake.

"I have made some inquiries," the ransar said, "andfind that you have very few close associates and no wife. No family."
Devorast nodded.
"So you have never known the love of a woman?" asked the ransar.
"I wouldn't say that," Devorast answered, and seemed content to leave it at that.
"I have," Pristoleph pressed on. "I do, I mean. At least, I believe I do. Her name is Phyrea."
Devorast sipped his wine, and there was something in the way his eyes moved that made Pristoleph's inner heat flare for the briefest moment. Devorast blinked, noticing the rise in temperature.
"You know her," Pristoleph said.
"We have met."
"I never thought, when I was a younger man, that I would ever love a woman the way I love her. Women for me were always... difficult. At first I didn't have enough gold, then I had too much. But then Phyrea. I had only to look upon her once—and if you've met her, then you certainly understand—and that was it. It was as though she ensnared me, or was it that she embraced me? I don't know."
Devorast just stared at him, but it was Pristoleph's turn to refuse to speak.
"I don't know what to say," Devorast finally said, and Pristoleph felt in that moment as though he had achieved the impossible.
"In ways I'm often loathe to admit," said Pristoleph, "I have surrendered a part of myself to her, a part that I will never get back, that is hers to do with as she will. And no matter what she does or what intrudes from outside, I will never regain that part of myself, and will never want to."
"I couldn't do that," Devorast said, and Pristoleph got the feeling it was something the Cormyrean didn't want to admit to himself, let alone to another. "I don't know how to do that."
"Yes you do," Pristoleph dared. "You have done the same with this canal of yours. That is why you would be content to work in the shadow of a buffoon like Horemkensi. That is why you will sit in a dungeon for more than a year and
come out wanting nothing more than to go back there and start digging again."
"Are you asking me to do that?" Devorast asked. "As the Ransar of Innarlith?"
Pristoleph said, "I am."
"And who will the men pretend to take their orders from?" Devorast asked.
"They will take their direction from you."
"And who will I answer to?" Devorast asked.

"You will answer to me," said the ransar.
"No," said Devorast.
Pristoleph closed his eyes and sighed.
"I will finish it," Devorast went on, "but I will do it for myself. I will do it for the work, for the doing of it, not for you, or for Innarlith, or for any ship captain who expects to make an extra silver piece from it. If you mean for me to do it, leave me alone to do it."
"Your own way," said the ransar, "with no oversight? No budget? No restrictions?"
"I can tell you precisely how much it will cost you," Devorast said, and Pristoleph almost winced at the power of the sheer self-confidence the man radiated, "down to the last copper."
Pristoleph said, "On your way out, write that figure on a sheet of parchment. Gather yourself—eat, sleep—find your man Surero, and get back to work. Build it for whomever you please, however you please, but I will hold you to the number on that sheet of parchment. Down to the last copper."
26_
16 Nightal, the Year of Wild Magic (1372 DR) The Thayan Enclave, Innarlith
A-nd what will it cost me to ensure that this stays between us?" Wenefir asked as he hefted the mace, obviously impressed with its perfect balance.
Marek Rymiit didn't tell the priest what he was thinking, of course, but instead lied. "My dear Seneschal, I assure you that all our transactions are made within the confines of the strictest, most impenetrable confidence. In fact, I won't even ask you who it is you intend to hide this beautiful piece from."
Wenefir rolled his eyes and said, "I am willing to pay for your silence, Master Rymiit, but if you assure me I already have it, I will have to hold you to that."
"And you wouldn't hold me to it if I did ask for coin?" the Red Wizard risked, and was answered with just the frigid glare he'd expected from the Cyricist. Time to calm things down. "I jest, of course."
"Fire and ice?" the priest asked, examining the platinum-inlaid mithral head of the enchanted weapon.
"You have merely to speak the word 'inflae' and the head of the weapon will burst into flame," the Red Wizard explained. "It will burn hotter than ordinary fire—but as long as you hold the mace, it will not burn you."
"And the ice?"
Marek took note of the strange look that fell over the priest as he asked that question. Though it wasn't an emotion he was personally plagued by, Marek thought the seneschal looked guilty.

"The word is 'cahlo', "said the wizard.
"Netherese___" Wenefir sighed.
"You're familiar with the ancient tongue?"
Wenefir shook his head and laid the mace back into the felt-lined duskwood box. He closed the lid with a gentle touch and flicked the clasp closed.
Marek sank into a leather chair and regarded the priest with a curious eye. The door opened and Marek nodded to the apprentice wizard who looked in.
"Some wine, perhaps?" Marek asked Wenefir, who shook his head, looking down at the box with a distant expression.
Marek waved the apprentice away and the door closed.
"How many Thayans live here now?" Wenefir asked.
Marek shrugged and smiled. He had no intention of replying in any further detail. Instead, he asked, "What is it, Wenefir? There's something on your mind, my old friend."
"Are we friends?" the priest asked. "I didn't think we were."
"There isn't a word for precisely what we are to each other, Wenefir," the Red Wizard answered, meaning to be cryptic in his response. "But I suppose 'friends' will have to do."
"I suppose so," the priest answered.
"So?"
Wenefir sighed, maybe just for effect, and said, "Pristoleph has freed Ivar Devorast and that alchemist of his."
Marek blinked and put a hand to his heart before he realized maybe he should try to pretend he wasn't surprised. But then, even someone who knew as much as Marek Rymiit knew had to hear everything for the first time.
"I suppose Devorast will return to work, then," the Red Wizard guessed.
"He was pulled out of an eight by eight cell in the dungeons under the Palace of Many Spires yesterday, and I understand he's already on his way north."
"Well," Marek said with a sigh, "I suppose that is the ransar's prerogative. Surely, though, as his seneschal, you had some influence on that decision."
"I suppose people could get that impression," the priest grumbled, his normally reedy voice surprisingly deep. "I have been his oldest and most loyal confidant for more years than I want to enumerate, but my opinion seems less and less relevant to him."
"Oh?" Marek prodded. "And who has the ransar's ear if not for you?"
"That woman ..." Wenefir started, but wouldn't let himself finish.
"It's been my experience," Marek said, not letting Wenefir stew too much over the fair Phyrea, "that men like Pristoleph rapidly tire of

women like Phyrea."
"Beauty fades?"
Marek laughed and even Wenefir cracked a smile.
"Beauty like Phyrea's shan't fade for many, many years to come, Seneschal," Marek said.
"Her influence on him will last as long, I fear." Marek shrugged that off.
"I'm surprised at you," Wenefir went on. "I suppose I'm always surprised at you ... but you as much as anyone helped make Pristoleph ransar, and to let that idiot girl, that mad woman, bend his ear..."
"What has she told him to do that so worries you?" Marek asked.
Wenefir shook his head and started to pace the parlor, his puffy girth coming close to knocking expensive Kozakuran ceramics from the side tables—and Marek winced with every pass.
"Was it Phyrea who prompted him to release Devorast?" the Red Wizard asked.
"I don't think so," the priest replied, "but perhaps. Regardless, she is a negative influence on a man who could do us both more harm than we'd like to admit, should circumstances move him in that direction."
"Then we will have to remain in control of his circumstances," the Red Wizard said. He wouldn't tell Wenefir the whole truth, but he thought maybe he could calm some of the priest's only partially-warranted fears. "Besides, I'm hardly afraid of Pristoleph."
"Careful, Master Rymiit," the priest warned. "The ransar is more than he seems."
"Oh, please, Wenefir," Marek replied with a chuckle that made his generous rolls shudder. "It takes more than a genasi to frighten me, I assure you."
Wenefir raised an eyebrow in surprise, but the expression was fleeting. "I should learn not to be surprised that you know everything about everyone."
Marek shrugged.
"Still, Marek-" Wenefir started.
"Calm yourself, Wenefir," the Red Wizard interrupted. "Between the two of us, Pristoleph is well in hand, and
should that stop being the case, well ... perhaps you can use your priestly skills to ask the rotting corpse of Salatis what happens when a ransar outlives his usefulness."
Wenefir stopped pacing and kept his eyes away from Marek's. He crossed his arms over his chest and his voice squeaked a little when he said, "Perhaps that wine, after all?"
27_
18 Nightal, the Year of Wild Magic (1372 DR) The Land of One Hundred and Thirteen

I had these teeth carved out of whalebone for you," Marek Rymiit said, holding up the little bowl for Willem to see. Gray-black clouds boiled in the sky above them. Standing on the roof of the tower as they were, the bottoms of the clouds seemed only inches above their heads. "Open your mouth."

The undead thing opened its jaws wide and Marek stepped closer. Emaciated and half-rotten, Willem Korvan stood naked in the uniformly warm air of his master's pocket dimension. Marek examined the spaces in his black gums where the teeth had fallen out.

"I wish you would have kept the originals," Marek chastised his creation. "These will do—no one will notice, anyway—but they'll hurt."

Marek didn't expect any reaction from Willem and didn't get one, but Insithryllax grunted from behind him and said, "Why do you speak to that thing as though it understands you?"

Willem's yellow eyes rolled in their deep-sunken sockets to fix on the dragon, who leaned against one of the battlements in his human form.

"What makes you think he can't understand me?" the Red Wizard asked.

"You're the expert," the dragon acquiesced, "but still...."

"Still, nothing," Marek said. "Willem understands me. It's a part of the curse, I suppose, and I doubt it's something he appreciates. In fact, if I didn't have total control of his shredded will, I have no doubt he'd have pounded me to death with one of my own limbs the way he did the late master builder."

"So," said the dragon, "doesn't that give you pause?"

Marek shook his head and chuckled in response. He chose one of the whalebone teeth and lined it up with a puckered, dried-up hole in the top right side of Willem's mouth. He pressed it in until it met a little resistance, then wiggled it around a bit until it started moving again. Willem didn't move or react in any way.

"That's grotesque, Marek," Insithryllax complained. "Really."

"Well, if you want to undo an omelet," Marek said, "you have to reassemble a few eggs."

He let go of the tooth and stepped back to make sure it was straight.

"Close enough?" he asked the dragon.

"A little to the left."

Marek adjusted the tooth and moved on to the next one.

"Don't you usually leave a hood on this thing anyway?" the dragon went on, and Marek started to wonder about his curiosity. "Surely this isn't cosmetic."

"Well, in a way it is," Marek said while he pressed the second tooth into another dead space in the thing's black gums. "You see, I require a living Willem Korvan for a time—or, well, a mostly living one,

anyway. His looks have always been his most potent weapon."
Insithryllax let out a scoffing breath.
"I meant it was his most potent weapon, my friend," Marek confirmed. "At any rate, I intend to restore a measure of life to our friend here."
Marek looked up at the undead man's eyes and was certain that there was some recognition there. He knew the creature could think, though not necessarily make decisions, and that he could speak, even.
"You hear me, don't you, Willem?" he said. "Do you want to live again?"
The creature just stood there.
"I'll take that as a maybe," Insithryllax said.
Marek jammed another false tooth into the dead man's gums and said, "O ye of little faith. He wants to live again, Insithryllax. Of that I am entirely certain, though he will likely not be terribly satisfied with the life he'll return to."
"He has been... gone," the dragon said, "for a long time, by human standards."
"He has, hasn't he?" Marek agreed. "But don't forget that I have some influence on the way the winds blow in Innarlith. I'll have him returned to the senate. I've even kept his house sealed and waiting for him."
"I'm sure he'll be delighted," said the dragon, even though Marek had just told him that Willem wouldn't be.
"Delighted or not," the Red Wizard said, "he will continue to be mine to command."
The dragon watched, occasionally commenting, while Marek finished restoring the dead man's teeth. When he was finished he stepped back to examine his handiwork and smiled.
"Willem," he said, "I have something to tell you." The undead creature gave no indication he'd heard a thing.
Marek turned to Insithryllax and said, "Just for you, my friend, a little demonstration. This is not a zombie, after all, and not insensate."
The dragon shrugged but continued to look on.
"Willem," Marek said, "the ransar has released Ivar Devorast from his dungeon."
The dead man's head twitched a fraction of an inch.
"You don't like that name, do you, Willem?" asked the Red Wizard. "Ivar Devorast?"
The dead man's jaws clacked closed, and Marek gasped, worried the new teeth might crack, but they remained intact.
"I know you want to kill him," Marek went on. "You will have your chance soon enough."
The corpse moved his head in a way that might have been a nod.
"I've sent others before you to claim his life," Marek said, "and they

have all failed."
"You've never sent me," Insithryllax said.
Marek ignored him and said to the corpse, "It will take everything I've put into you to kill that one, I think, though I still can't put my finger on why he's managed to live this long. Sheer force of will, I'm sure. But for the nonce I'm going to awaken a force that I left latent inside you when first I helped you transform into your current state. When your heart beats once more you'll go back to Innarlith and the remains of your life."
The undead thing just stood there, silent and unmoving.
"I want you to go back to being a second-rate human," Marek said, "before I make you a first-rate monster."
28_
19 Nightal, the Year of Wild Magic (1372 DR) The Canal Site
Iristoleph pulled the two boards apart with his bare hands, the too-small nails squeaking and bending as they gave way. He blinked in the drizzling rain and watched as Devorast pried two more boards apart with a crowbar. He placed the board with no nails left in it on a neat stack of weathered planks then went to work on the nails sticking out of the other board.
"There will be no shortage of disappointed dilettantes in Innarlith this evening," Pristoleph said.
Devorast glanced at him but didn't answer.
Pristoleph smiled and looked at the viewing stand. It was half the size it was when it was filled, just days before, with gawking spectators. The previous overseers of the
canal project had had it moved along the length of the slowly-growing canal so the curious could see the construction and the accidents up close.
"They've gotten used to seeing people killed again," Pristoleph went on. "When you were operating in secret and the rate of accidents fell sharply off, they'd stopped coming, but while you sat in the dungeon, the bloodshed returned, and so did they."
Devorast, who'd removed the nails from the board he was working on, placed it on the stack and went to work on another step with his crowbar. Only he and the ransar worked on disassembling the viewing stand. The rest of the workers were busy on the canal itself, and Devorast refused to allow them to waste their time taking apart something that shouldn't have been built in the first place.
"Perhaps I should have left you in there," Pristoleph said, intentionally baiting Devorast. "I could have sold tickets. As long as things blew up in people's faces and men were buried alive in mud, I would have made a fortune."
"You already have a fortune," Devorast said.

Pristoleph laughed, but studied the man at the same time. There was no anger apparent on his face, but he did seem annoyed, if only just a bit.
"I suppose you're right," the ransar said. "I have several fortunes. Perhaps you can go home, abduct your realm's infant king, and come to me for the ransom. I can pay it."
"But would you?"
Pristoleph stopped, making a show of the surprise he felt hearing Devorast actually ask a question. He didn't pretend to know the man, but he could feel it was unusual for him. Pristoleph thought he might have been getting somewhere.
"No," Pristoleph said, "I wouldn't. Would you? If you had the means, of course."
"The king of Cormyr is not my responsibility," Devorast said, "and besides, he has the royal family to pay his ransom."
"Someone else, then," the ransar prodded. "Someone closer to you?"
"It's a meaningless question, Ransar."
"I wasn't always the man I am today, you know," Pristoleph said.
Devorast stacked more weathered lumber then started prying apart another step.
"I grew up in the Fourth Quarter," Pristoleph said. "I grew up in the streets, but never in the gutter. I made myself what I am today by the force of my own will."
Devorast glanced at him, but Pristoleph couldn't quite decipher the expression.
"It was a long and difficult road from the Fourth Quarter," Pristoleph said, "to here, where I am now: the highest-paid garbage man in Faerun."
"I'm not paying you," Devorast said.
"Nor are you understanding any of my jokes," the ransar said. "Still, I get the feeling you have a sense of humor. After all, here you are working peacefully side by side with the man who held you in a stinking hole in the ground for more than a year. I would have killed me."
"I'm not stopping you," Devorast said.
Pristoleph laughed loud and hard, and for a while they went to work taking the viewing stand apart in silence.
"I also had to rely on myself as a child," Devorast said, and Pristoleph was startled as much by the sudden sound of his voice as by the admission itself.
"Then you know what it's like," Pristoleph said, "to struggle for everything, to fight for every hint of power and influence, and every copper."
"No, I don't."

Pristoleph stopped what he was doing and stared at Devorast, waiting for him to go on.
He had to wait a long time before Devorast said, "I've never been interested in power and influence. I don't want to control people, and coins are tools to be used when you have them, and replaced by other tools when you don't."
"So what do you want?" Pristoleph asked. "I want to take apart this viewing stand, then use the lumber to build two ladders and a pair of trench braces."
29_
21 Hammer, the Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR) Second Quarter, Innarlith
My Dearest Mother,
Where have I been? What has happened to me?
I know it has been so very long since you've heard from your dutiful son. Perhaps you, like some here in Innarlith, assumed that I had met my end. I pray to all the gods ever evoked by a desperate man that this was not the case, and that you held me in your heart, always with the fires of hope burning in your bosom, that I was indeed well but in some way occupied.
And such has been the case, these many months—and can it really have been so long? It seems as though I fell asleep one night and woke up three years later.
Truly, can it have been that long?
Three years?
Three years with no news from me—for that I will spend the entirety of my life apologizing to my steadfast and loving mother, the only woman who would have held out hope for my return, the only woman who had not abandoned me, even when you left Innarlith to return to Marsember.
And what a disgrace that was—my disgrace, my dear mother, and certainly not yours—that I allowed you to be driven from my own home by a woman in whom I placed trust, only to have my heart rent from my chest and held, still beating, before my face that she might sink her harpy's fangs into its meat and draw from it the last drop of the blood you yourself bore into me.
For that, I am sorry, too.
But where have I been? How have three years passed without a word from me? Those are questions to which you deserve a long and detailed answer. Though I have thought of little else in the past tendays, I have no answer to any of my own questions that satisfy me, much less that I believe would satisfy you.
When I was thrown to the side by that cruel woman, that alu-fiend in a girl's guise, when you were proven right yet again and my own lack

of faith in the wisdom of my dear protective mother was held up close to my eyes, when I was shown lacking, when I died, I—
When I died?
Thatis what it felt like. It felt as though I died, but that word has not come to my mind or my lips since I entered my own house to find it closed and musty, with three years' dust coating every surface—that word hasn't come to my mind or my lips, strange that it should be summoned by my pen.
In some ways perhaps I was dead. Dead in the heart. I had opened myself to the love of a woman who was not worthy of me. I put my trust in men who guided me wrong. I let my dear mother return alone to Marsember, there to live without word or support from a son who must have seemed so ungrateful, so disrespectful, as to simply ignore her for so long.
But that was not my intention, and if you ever believe anything I tell you again, if you have left in you a spark of the fire of the love for your poor son that I once felt burn from within you, please believe that what happened to me must have been beyond my control.
Of those three years I recall only dreams, Nightmares, in fact. I remember foul odors and wicked deeds. I recall the feeling of my body rotting away, while my soul was imprisoned within to feel every stinging bite of ten thousand flies nibbling away at my flesh.
But that couldn't be. None of that could be.
Here I am now, three years on, hale and hearty, though you would find me thin. Here I am alive and awake and aware.
Here I am having changed two things about me.
First, no longer will I hold an image of Phyrea in my mind. Beautiful as she is, she is a being of frozen evil, a mad woman who has now put her spell upon another, and so be it. The man she has ensorcelled will have to care for himself, though for his sake I hope he has a mother like you, to tell him that he has made an error that could well destroy him as it nearly did me. And I hope that he, unlike your penitent son, will have the wisdom to heed his mother's warnings.
And second, there is the drink. When last we embraced I know that on my breath was the wind of the still, the stink of fermented grapes—the tell-tale odor of a man without the will to face himself in the mirror.
My dearest mother, to you I pledge this above all else: I will set aside all drink. I will not drown my sorrows but ever do battle against them. I will regain all of what I lost, and with you by my side, and the continued support of important personages within the city-state, I will achieve yet more. I will finally be the man you always knew I would be, even when I didn't know that myself.
And yes, dearest mother, you did not imagine those words: with you

by my side. With this letter is a box of coins—enough I am sure for passage to Arrabar. I will meet you there myself with my own coach to hasten you back to our home—not mine but our home—here in the city-state that has given me challenges, to be sure, but has also drawn me into its inner circle. Together, we will found a dynasty here. Together, we will make the house of Korvan synonymous with Innarlith itself.
Return, Mother.
Please.
-Willem
P.S.: I hope that upon your arrival, or by a return letter should that arrive before you, that you will advise me on a remedy for a rather monstrous pain in my teeth.
3Q_
22 Hammer, the Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR) Pristal Towers, Innarlith
Every moment I'm away from him, Phyrea thought, the less sane I become.
Stop it, the old woman chastised her, the ghost's tone sharp and imperious—more so than usual.
It's true, Phyrea thought in reply.
No, it isn't, said the man with the scar on his face.
Phyrea looked across the table at Ivar Devorast, and when he met her eyes, she looked back down at her plate of untouched curried eel. The snakelike thing's eyes seemed to mock her.
While Devorast and Pristoleph discussed the canal—a seemingly endless chatter of supplies and barges and lumber and stone and sand and water—Phyrea palmed the little two-pronged fork that had been included in the elaborate place setting.
They put it there so you could stab the eel's eye, gouge it out, and eat it, the little boy with the missing arm said.
A delicacy, said the man with the scar. J remember it. I can remember eating.
My mother always told me it was rude to eat the other eye, said the ghost of the little girl. A lady should never flip an eel over on her plate.
Slowly, careful not to reveal her actions to the two men, Phyrea slid the hem of her skirt up past her knee, and a little farther still.
What are you doing with that fork? the old woman asked.
Phyrea sat very still and very quiet while she pressed the two sharp little tines of the eel-eye fork into the soft
flesh of her inner thigh. The pain came in a sudden burst, small, but fresh and insistent. She closed her eyes, luxuriating in the wash of it, and the silence that followed, however brief.

She already had a napkin on her lap, so it was easy for her to dab the little droplets of blood that bubbled to the surface of the wound. The men continued speaking, not noticing her, and so she did it again.
When she dabbed the second wound she let a finger trace the edge of a bandage that she'd wrapped around her thigh. Beneath it were more little cuts, some still oozing a little blood, every one worth a few moments away from the ghosts.
Pristoleph had noticed the wounds, of course. The first time he had been worried, then he reacted with anger, and eventually the sight of the little cuts just made him sad. But he was never disgusted. And he never asked her why.
"Have you spoken with the nagas since you've returned?" Pristoleph asked Devorast, and it was the first sentence she'd really heard since Devorast had arrived earlier that evening. She'd gone through the motions, of course, acting the dutiful wife and charming hostess as best she could with apparitions of violet light circling her, telling her to kill her guest and to kill herself.
"I have," Devorast replied. He glanced at her again but she couldn't make herself look him in the eye. "The terms of our bargain remain unchanged."
"Then there is nothing in your way," Pristoleph said with a self-satisfied finality that made Phyrea's flesh crawl, especially when Devorast shook his head.
You will have to kill him, the man with the scar in the shape of the letter Z told her. You know—we've told you over and over—that you will have to kill him.
His presence doesn't ease your mind, child, the old woman told her. He can't drive us away anymore. You've been apart too long. He's forgotten you.
He's given you to the genasi, the woman who cried for her dead baby said. He's left you in the hand of this half-human thing, this ransar who will be killed soon enough, to make way for the next new ransar. These men will leave you, always, one way or another. Even Willem went away, and so what if he's back? He came back just the moment you'd forgotten about him entirely, just the precise moment he stopped loving you.
"Stop it," Phyrea whispered.
"Phyrea?" Pristoleph asked. "Did you say something, my love?"
Phyrea cringed and shook her head. She tried to say she was sorry but wasn't conscious of saying anything.
"If you're not feeling well___" Devorast offered, and
when she realized he was trying to take his leave of them, that he was trying to go away again, she shook her head.
"I'm fine," she said, and by enormous force of will made her lips curl

up in a smile. "Please. Go on. I'm perfectly fine."
"But you haven't eaten," Pristoleph said.
Phyrea, the man with the scar whispered in her head, are you finally letting yourself see the truth?
"The truth?" she replied aloud.
"Of course," Pristoleph said at the same time as the ghost.
The truth, the old woman said, is that these men will never love you. All they'll do is borrow you from each other, trade you back and forth, until there's nothing left of you.
Nothing left of you to live on, the little girl said.
"You don't like the eel?" Pristoleph asked. "Have you tried the eyes? They're a delicacy. Or shall I have the cook prepare another dish for you?"
Phyrea chanced a look up at Devorast, who stared at her in a way she couldn't comprehend. Either he understood her perfectly, or he didn't care one bit.
Come with us, the little boy begged.
Let this all end, the old woman demanded.
"No," Phyrea said, sinking the little fork half an inch into her inner thigh so that a trail of blood ran along her hand, to her wrist, to drip unseen onto the cold marble floor. "I'm fine. I'm just fine."
31_
27 Hammer, the Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR) The Chamber of Law and Civility, Innarlith
A.s they walked together into the senate chamber, Willem couldn't help thinking Meykhati was afraid of him. The normally jovial, condescending man kept his face turned away—not so much as most people would notice, but he never looked Willem in the eye.
"It hasn't changed," Willem said, thinking Meykhati would expect him to say something like that, his having been away from the senate for three years.
Meykhati nodded but offered no other reply. When they passed a junior senator Willem didn't recognize, Meykhati stopped and greeted the young man as though they were old friends who hadn't seen each other in decades. The junior senator was obviously flustered by Meykhati's attention, but played along well. He only snuck a few glances Willem's way, and again Willem thought he saw fear.
Why, he asked himself, would any of these people be afraid of me?
"Senator?" Willem said, touching Meykhati's elbow.
The senior senator flinched as though Willem's touch had burned him. The younger man he'd been speaking with took a full step backward and only just barely stopped himself from putting both hands up to fend Willem off. When Meykhati turned, he spoke to Willem's chest, not his eyes, and his face was tense.

"Please don't wait for me, Senator," he said.
Willem paused. It appeared Meykhati had more to say, but instead he turned back to the junior senator and a spirited discussion of the uniformly gray and rainy winter weather.
With a sigh, Willem stepped down the aisle, walking slowly to give himself time both to consider Meykhati's strange manner and to simply soak in the air of the place. He had always been intimidated, even afraid of the senate chamber, but coming back to it after having been away for so long, he realized how much he missed it.
That thought made him pull up short. Another senator brushed behind him, then scurried into one of the rows of seats muttering the starts to half a dozen different apologies. It was another man Willem didn't recognize.
He shook his head, not sure why he'd stopped walking. Was it something about missing the senate chamber? But he would have had to have been conscious of where he was and what he'd been doing for the last three years to really miss a place. But still Willem either couldn't, or on some level he couldn't control in himself, wouldn't think about that.
"Willem Korvan," a woman's voice came from behind him. He turned to see a woman with her right eye covered by a silk patch, staring up at him with her left. Her white hair was thinning, and the lines in her face were deeper than Willem remembered. "Is that really you?"
"Senator Nyla," Willem said, holding out his hand. "It's always a pleasure to see you."
Nyla looked down at his hand and leaned back just a little. "Forgive me," she said, "but I've been sneezing all day, and...."
"Quite all right," Willem said, just so the uncomfortable moment would pass.
"Is it true, what they say?" she asked. "I'm sorry?"
She squirmed a little in her own skin just then, and Willem almost gasped at the sight of it.
She cleared her throat and said, "You've been gone too long."
He nodded, hoping she would say more, but instead she scanned the room as if looking for an escape route.
"What do they say, Senator?" Willem pressed, but at that moment wasn't sure he wanted to know.
"Think nothing of it," she said. "I shouldn't have said anything. Forgive me?"
"I'm certain there's nothing to forgive," he said, "but—"
"We should take our seats," she interrupted, then walked away from him a little too quickly.
"She's right," Meykhati said. Willem wasn't quite startled, but he hadn't been aware of the senator's approach. "You know which way the vote

is to go, then?"
"Yes," Willem said, once again trying to engage Meykhati in eye contact but failing. "I mean, I think so. What are we debating?"
Willem knew full well what the session had been called to vote on, but he found himself compelled to make further conversation with the man who'd been his sponsor for so long, but who couldn't or wouldn't look him in the eye.
"We're here to vote for the purchase of wands that will allow the gate guards to detect the presence of magical radiations and dweomers," Meykhati said, his eyes lazily scanning the room, but steadfastly not looking at Willem. "Once those are in place we can begin to assign a tax on any magical items brought into the city by non-citizens."
"Why?" Willem asked.
"Why the tax?" Meykhati responded. When Willem nodded he said, "To help defer the cost of the wands."
"And we are for this?" Willem clarified.
"Yes," Meykhati replied. "Please, take your seat."
Willem nodded and watched Meykhati pass other senators who tried to stop him to chat. The senior senator found his chair and all but fell into it. He put his face in his hands and breathed hard, wiping sweat from his
brow and upper lip. He took a deep breath, held it, then seemed to sense that Willem was still looking at him. He turned, still holding the breath, and when their eyes finally met, Willem's skin went cold and his own breath caught in his throat.
He's terrified of me, Willem thought.
He turned his head so Meykhati wouldn't have to look him in the eye anymore, then Willem took his seat and prepared to vote for another purposeless tax.
32_
28 Hammer, the Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR) Pristal Towers, Innarlith
Marek Rymiit took a deep breath and held it. He'd just been told by the ransar something he already knew: Ivar Devorast had once again taken charge of the canal. Marek scanned the room, taking a mental inventory of all the expensive gewgaws and whatnots that crowded the space. He stopped counting when he reached ten thousand gold pieces and had examined barely a tenth of the room's contents.
Behind him stood Insithryllax, in his human form, with his arms crossed over his chest. Marek thought his old friend looked more tense that usual, but the black dragon had refused to tell him what was wrong, though Marek had asked repeatedly in the coach from the Second Quarter.
"And if I were to advise you against that course of action?" the Red

Wizard asked the ransar.
Pristoleph cracked a smile in return and said, "It's already done. Ivar Devorast has my full confidence."
"He will be master builder, then?" the dragon asked, and Marek could hear the irritation in his voice.
"Insithryllax, please," Marek cautioned. "I apologize, Ransar, but my companion has asked an interesting question, and one that begs an answer. The city-state has been
without a master builder since the unfortunate murder of Senator Horemkensi."
"You know," Pristoleph replied, his tone artificially conversational, "I asked him about that. I offered him the position, in fact, with a rather generous stipend—more than was given to Inthelph, even—and he accepted on the spot with rather gracious thanks."
Marek pursed his lips and let a breath hiss out through his nose. He heard a similar sound escape Insithryllax.
"I had a quill in my hand to sign the proclamation, not a heartbeat later," Pristoleph went on, "and he grabbed it off my desk and tore it in half. He shouted at me, actually. It's the only time I've ever heard him shout. People have told me they've known him for years and never heard him raise his voice. He told me he didn't want a title and didn't want any part of running the city-state. He didn't want to work for me or for anyone, and certainly not for what he called a 'meaningless collective.' I'm still puzzling over what he meant by that, precisely."
Marek said, "You will excuse my ignorance, Ransar, but I don't think I understand. He refused the appointment?"
"In no uncertain terms."
"And yet still he commands the army of workers that continue to build this canal of his?" the Red Wizard said.
"Yes ... well," the ransar hesitated, "not all of the workers."
Marek raised an eyebrow and leaned back against the soft leather cushion behind him. The chair was comfortable, but still the Thayan felt ill at ease. He could feel the black dragon standing behind him as though Insithryllax loomed in his true, draconic form. With the genasi in front of him, Marek felt trapped. He began to sweat.
"He will need you to give him control of the zombies," Pristoleph said.
"No," the dragon in human form said. "Don't help him, for-"
"It will be costly," Marek said, cutting the dragon off.
Pristoleph shrugged and Marek was left to ponder how much he'd grown to hate that gesture, though only a few scant months ago, he'd loved it more than anything. The genasi's seemingly bottomless purse was responsible for nearly four out of every ten gold pieces the enclave brought in. Marek knew there wasn't another suitable

candidate for ransar that would even begin to make up for that.
"What's a few zombies here and there between friends?" Marek said with a smile he knew would look as false as it was.
"I have a list," Pristoleph said. "He requires other items."
Marek swallowed again and said, "If I have it or if it can be made, I will be delighted to arrange it for you."
"Not for me," Pristoleph said with a smile Marek longed to wipe from his face with a fireball—no, not a fireball against a fire genasi, but an ice storm.
Yes, the Red Wizard thought, a blast of tiny daggers of glasslike ice—or acid.
"I beg your pardon, Ransar?" Marek said through stiff jaws.
"The items are not for me," the ransar clarified, "but for Ivar Devorast."
Insithryllax stormed around the sofa and stood over Pristoleph. The ransar didn't move, but Marek could feel him growing hotter.
"Insithryllax!" the Thayan barked.
Insithryllax didn't turn, but growled at the ransar, "I cannot be compelled to help this man. You are not my master."
Marek scuffled to his feet and though he knew it wasn't allowed, he barked out the words to a spell when he saw that Insithryllax was beginning to transform. It was likely that Pristoleph was unable to detect any change in the dark-skinned, black-clad man who everyone thought was simply Marek Rymiit's bodyguard, but Marek had known Insithryllax too long, and he could tell.
With the aid of the calming spell, Marek said, "Insithryllax, please. The ransar has always been a valued customer of the Thayan Enclave. If he has a list, we know he has the means."
Insithryllax relaxed, but only enough to forestall his transformation—a physical change that would have burst the little parlor at its seams. If Pristal Towers was built strong enough, the dragon would have succeeded only in crushing himself and the ransar. Marek's various contingency spells would have spirited him away, but what a mess he would have left to explain.
Truly, though, the question wasn't what would happen if the dragon did transform and attack, but why he almost had.
"Insithryllax, please," Marek said once more, and finally the dragon withdrew, cursing under his breath in Draconic.
When Marek once again returned his attention to the ransar, he was amazed how calm the genasi was. Pristoleph didn't frighten easily, and that made Marek wonder what it would take to frighten him.
"They can be delivered directly to Devorast," Pristoleph said, "at the canal site."
"Of course they can," Marek replied. "Ransar, I would be remiss in my duty to you and to the city-state of Innarlith if I did not advise you not

to trust this man Devorast."
"And why wouldn't I trust a man who has only ever done everything he's promised to do?" the ransar asked.
"Ransar, I-"
"I'm not finished, Marek," Pristoleph said, and his use of the familiar while Marek called him "Ransar," rankled the Red Wizard to no end. "Ivar Devorast summoned this canal unbidden from his own imagination. No one who has been put in charge of it since has used anything but his original drawings. He has not sought to enrich himself. He has refused power and influence. He is no threat to anyone, including you. Why is it you seem to despise him so?"
Marek rubbed his face with both hands and spent a long time thinking about how to respond. Insithryllax put a hand on his shoulder and began to squeeze.
"Please," the Red Wizard whispered over his shoulder to the dragon.
Marek found himself more curious as to the source of Insithryllax's anger than a suitably cunning response to the ransar's question. He'd known the dragon for many years and had come to respect his often unpredictable temper, but Insithryllax had always seemed personally ambivalent toward the canal and didn't ever seem to give Ivar Devorast much thought. He made a mental note to ask the dragon about all that in greater detail once they returned to the enclave.
"I don't hate him," Marek said to Pristoleph. "I hate what he's doing and how he's doing it.-1 hate how he misuses you and those who have held the office of ransar since and including Osorkon."
"You hate that the canal will make your teleport—"
"I profit from the canal," the Thayan interrupted, perhaps just a bit too loudly. He cleared his throat, felt a wave of heat wash over him from the genasi, and in a calmer, quieter voice, went on. "I profit from the canal in many ways, Ransar, and I will continue to do just that, even after its construction is complete ... should that actually ever come to pass."
"Then what do you care who digs the damned thing?" Pristoleph asked, letting some of his anger at having been interrupted in his own house show in his smoldering eyes.
Marek's skin crawled, but not from the ransar's disapproving stare. The Red Wizard could sense the rage building once more from the more-than-human figure behind him. The spell should have made him as tranquil as a nursing baby, but instead the dragon seemed to have brushed it off.
Forced to concede the ransar's point, Marek said his good-byes as quickly as he could without being overly rude
and got the dragon out of there before—and it seemed to be just before—anyone was killed.

25 Alturiak, the Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR) Pristal Towers, Innarlith

Efteen people, including Wenefir, sat on various chairs and sofas in the enormous office of Ransar Pristoleph. Some of them were mages, six were black firedrakes, and the rest were advisors and hangers on, or part-time spies. A few of them read through journal books and ledgers, occasionally making notes. Two of them played a long, half-hearted game of sava. The rest stared at one or another of a score of crystal balls that had been arranged on stands around the room. From those enchanted devices, Pristoleph was able to look in on the comings and goings of friends and enemies alike.

A small group of men stood around one crystal ball, leering and giggling at the magically conjured image of the wife of a senator they all knew well who was engaged in an illicit dalliance with her upstairs maid. The senator himself appeared in another of the crystal balls, taking tea with two other senators in an opulent sitting room elsewhere in the Second Quarter.

Pristoleph sighed and propped his head in his hands, his elbows on the gigantic desktop in front of him.

"Oh, my!" exclaimed one of the men looking into the crystal ball at the senator's wife and her maid.

Pristoleph looked up, noticing the sudden change in mood. The men around the crystal ball stared at the image with shock and concern, all leering gone. The crystal ball showed that the senator's wife's maid was not a maid at all.

One of the mages passed a hand over the crystal ball and the group of men dispersed, all looking vaguely

embarrassed. None of them looked at the image of the senator still enjoying his tea and gossip, unaware of how bizarre a cuckold he was.

Pristoleph heaved another sigh, louder and deeper.

"Is something the matter, Ransar?" Wenefir asked.

Pristoleph shook his head.

"Is there anything I can get you, my lord?" one of the advisors inquired.

Pristoleph ignored him and sifted through the parchment, paper, and vellum on his desk. There were letters, account ledgers, writs, and;requests, and they all bored him to tears. He'd fallen behind with all the reading and signing, signing and reading, and the more he tried to force himself to get caught up, the less work he actually did. The advisors had gone from tolerant to testy to insistent and back to tolerant again, having lost interest in the fact that he'd lost interest.

As the bulk of the people in the room watched the sava game, none of them really interested in it, Pristoleph quickly skimmed one sheet

after another, sliding them off the desktop as he read them. He signed one, a request for the release of a man held in the dungeons for stealing a chicken. The request had been entered by the man's wife nearly a year before, and the man had been in the dungeon for two years before that. A letter from a senator he knew had since died of a particularly nasty strain of social disease no priest in the city was able to cure was sent off the edge of the desk only partially read. And that went on for a long time.

When one of the black firedrakes announced Ivar Devorast, he stopped.

"Everyone out," Pristoleph said as Devorast was shown into the room.

Devorast glanced sideways at the crystal balls but didn't stop until he reached one of the chairs that faced the ransar's desk.

"Everyone, Ransar?" Wenefir asked, eyeing Devorast with a dangerous scowl.

Pristoleph clapped the priest on the shoulder and said, "I will be quite all right, my old friend. Please."

Wenefir made a point of bowing low before he followed the others out of the room.

"Sit," Pristoleph said to Devorast when they were finally alone.

"You're busy," Devorast said, but Pristoleph could tell the man had no intention of volunteering to leave.

He motioned to the chair and they both sat. Pristoleph let out a long sigh.

"I'm relieved to see you, Ivar," Pristoleph said. "May I call you Ivar?"

Devorast answered with a gesture that was half nod and half shrug. Pristoleph instantly decided to learn how to do that.

"The Thayan didn't deliver everything on the list," Devorast said.

Pristoleph sighed again and said, "I'm not surprised." "He wasn't paid?"

"Oh, he was paid," said Pristoleph. "He just doesn't like you."

Devorast scowled. "What could that matter?"

"To me?" Pristoleph replied. "Nothing at all, but the Thayan is a bit... odd. He has to like you, or at least he has to think you like him."

"Then I will have to make do without the rest," said Devorast.

"For the nonce, yes, I suppose, but don't give up hope entirely. He may hate you, but he likes—no, he loves—gold. I'll make sure your needs are met, as we agreed."

Devorast made to stand, but Pristoleph waved him down.

"Please," said the ransar. "I have very few people to talk to. I think these stacks of parchment are driving me mad. Phyrea seems to hear voices I can't while mine goes entirely unnoticed. Wenefir has this god of his now, though he still plays the faithful lieutenant. The rest of them I

hardly know—useful sycophants, I suppose, but nothing more. I'm

starved for someone to talk to."
"As the ransar," Devorast said with the hint of a smile, "couldn't you just order someone to talk to you?"
"When I said they were useful sycophants, I meant that they are no more to me than tools. It would be like you having a conversation with one of your shovels."
"My shovel serves me, at least."
"And these men serve me," said the ransar. "The city-state is hale and hearty and safe. We have no enemies. The streets are reasonably peaceful."
"Does that mean you have succeeded?" Devorast asked.
"I'm not sure what you mean," Pristoleph replied. "All that could turn on a silver piece. When you wield power over other men, you're never successful, because you're never finished."
"I've been getting through to you after all," Devorast said, and the two men shared a rare and precious laugh.
34_
17 Tarsakh, the Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR) The Thayan Enclave, Innarlith
It was Halina," Marek said, his head heavy on his neck, his shoulders drooping. "It was my own niece, after all."
"I'll melt her flesh off her bones," Insithryllax said in a voice even deeper, even more potent than normal. "I'll dissolve her. I'll liquefy her."
They walked side by side in the courtyard of the evergrowing cluster of buildings, and Marek stopped short. Insithryllax continued another few steps then whirled on the Red Wizard. The dragon wore his human guise, but when he turned, Marek was startled by his eyes, which had gone entirely black. The dragon's forehead furrowed and his jaw tightened into a trembling grimace.
Marek smiled, but at the same time had to clench his hands into fists to keep them from shaking.
"Is there something else amiss, my friend?" the wizard asked. "You seem—"
Insithryllax turned away, and Marek winced—people didn't turn their backs on him often, and the Red Wizard didn't like it.
"How can you stand it?" the dragon grumbled.
"Insithryllax, what's come over you?"
The dark-skinned man flexed his hands and his fingers stretched into horrible, elongated talons.
"Insithryllax," Marek said, stepping closer behind him with some reluctance. "Remember yourself, my friend."
The disguised dragon's right hand shrank to its human form, but his left remained spindly and capped with razor-edged claws. A sound

came from him that was something between human speech and the thunderous roar of a great wyrm.
A young wizard stepped out from one of the doors that opened onto the courtyard. She had been in Innarlith less than a month, having come from Thay to learn alchemy and make minor potions and ointments for the Third Quarter tradesmen. Marek didn't remember her name. When she saw Insithryllax, she stopped, her eyes wide. She could see something Marek couldn't— Insithryllax's face—and her reaction froze the blood in Marek's veins.
"This isn't like you," Marek said. "Calm yourself. Now."
Insithryllax turned his head and glanced back over his shoulder. Marek gasped at the sight of his twisted features. The transformation was blurring him, combining the human with the draconic to create a hellish mask of black menace.
"How can you stand it?" the wyrm said. "Your own flesh, a girl you took into your home, who had nowhere else to go and burdened you with her foolishness and now she destroys something you worked to create? How can you not roar your rage to the skies? How can you not take wing, to drive her down before you and reduce her to paste?"
"Well," Marek offered, "what's a few zombies between an uncle and his favorite niece?"
"You toy with me," the dragon growled, and the fingers of his right hand snapped out like whips, transforming instantly into talons to match his left. "Don't toy with me. Tell me to kill her. Tell me to kill them all."
Marek spoke an incantation and gathered a feeling of calm. He took a deep breath, held it for a few heartbeats while Insithryllax continued to slowly transform, bit by bit, in front of him. When the Red Wizard exhaled he sent a wave of calm washing over the dragon. It was a simple spell, but one Marek wasˆonfident would at least slow the black dragon's mounting rage.
"Save your breath," the dragon said. "You know you want her dead. She'll start on the dock workers next. She'll destroy everything you've built."
"Not just her, though," Marek said. The dragon turned away, wings beginning to sprout from his slowly-widening back. "That's the thing, my friend. Kill her, attack her at the temple, and we make an enemy of her whole faith. They are hardly to be concerned with one at a time, but should their goddess take notice of—"
"Goddess?" the dragon shot back, his voice so loud and so low-pitched it set Marek's ears ringing.
The girl who'd been watching them from the door slapped her hands to her ears.
"Leave us..." Marek called to her, but he couldn't remember her

name,"... you. Leave us!"
The girl had her hands over her ears and couldn't hear.
"Girl!" Marek screamed.
Insithryllax turned in her direction and she screamed, her hands still over her ears. Marek shouted for her to run, but she couldn't hear him. A cloud of black mist washed over her, expelled from Insithryllax's head, which had fully transformed into the head of a dragon. When the mist hit her, her skin blistered. She opened her mouth to scream again and inhaled a deep breath of acid. Instead of another scream, what
came out was a white and pink froth. Her eyes melted into her skull and were gone entirely in less than a single heartbeat. The girl lived too long, dissolving away while trying to breathe and scream, but succeeding only in sizzling.
When she finally collapsed, Insithryllax tipped his head up into the sky and roared as his neck stretched. His tail lashed out behind him, his wings burst into full form, and he dropped onto all fours.
Marek ran through a spell more potent than the last, one that would temporarily rid the dragon of any intellect at all, leaving him open to whatever calming suggestion the Red Wizard chose to imbed in his consciousness.
"Insithryllax, please," he said.
The dragon stretched his wings and with a groan his transformation was complete. "My friend, I-"
"No!" the black wyrm shouted. Marek stepped back, feeling as though the dragon's voice had physically pushed him. "I'll kill her. I'll kill them all. I'll reduce their temple to mud. I'll melt them from the face of Toril."
Marek tried to make eye contact with the wyrm, but Insithryllax wouldn't—or couldn't look him in the eye.
The Red Wizard brought a spell to mind as the dragon leaped into the air. It wasn't easy casting it in the wash of dust and leaves under Insithryllax's titanic wings, but he did his best to hold firm.
Marek's spell opened a gray-black doorway in the air an arm's length in front of the dragon, who flew blindly into the slowly-rotating zone of darkness. Without pause, the dragon, blind with rage, flew into the middle of it. When the last fraction of an inch of the black dragon's tail passed through the horizon of the effect, Marek slammed it shut with an exertion of his will.
The door in the sky disappeared and took the dragon with it.
"Master," a voice sounded from behind and above the Red Wizard. "Is everything well?"
"No," Marek answered, then stopped himself and cleared his throat. "Everything is fine, but someone will have to clean up the... the..."

Marek pointed at the still-sizzling remains of the acid-melted apprentice alchemist, "... the mess, over there."
"The dragon is gone, Master?" another of the apprentices called from a window.
"He's gone, yes," Marek said with a sigh. He folded his arms across his chest and sighed again. He closed his eyes, thinking, wondering what could have come over Insithryllax. "He's gone back to the Land of One Hundred and Thirteen."
"Will he be back?" asked yet another wizard, one visiting from Thazrumaros to help the growing staff of the Innarlith enclave master the art of creating magic wands.
"No," Marek said even as he considered whether he should bother answering at all. "He won't be back until I bring him back."
"Please don't, Master," the wandmaker said in a voice loaded with fear and on the edge of panic.
35_
SEleasias, the Yearof Rogue Dragons (1373 DR) Second Quarter, Innarlith
Aii of his best Shou ceramics—and it was fine indeed— was set out. Not a single detail had been overlooked. The silver shone so brightly in the candlelight it was difficult for him to look at the table. The crystal stemware glimmered with tiny rainbows, and the table linens were as white as fresh-fallen snow. A line of wine bottles had been opened and decanted, left to breathe a little too long already. The food—prepared by a small army of cooks who had long since gone—sat cooling on silver trays on a huge mahogany sideboard he'd purchased specially for the event.
Willem sat in a stiff, uncomfortable chair he'd had for years and didn't remember ever having sat in. He let the breath out through his nose.
"I'll be going to bed now," his mother said, her voice barely more than a whisper, from behind him. "Unless you...?"
She didn't finish, but Willem shook his head anyway. Of course he didn't expect his mother, only two months back in Innarlith from Cormyr, to help him clean up. As the only witness to what had become the most humiliating day of his life, he really just wanted her to go upstairs, go to bed, and perhaps forget what she had seen that evening.
"Willem, my dear?"
He turned to look at her and winced at the look of disappointment that was written so plainly on her face. She looked away as though he were diseased or in some way deformed. She looked away as though he were a beggar in the street. Without another word she shuffled off, her long silk gown rustling, the jewelry he'd bathed her in tinkling with each step.

He sat there for some time longer, watching the candles shrink, dripping wax on the clean linen. Willem knew the last thing he'd be able to do was sleep. He needed someone to tell him why—tell him how, tell him when he had been abandoned by everyone. How could all two hundred invitations be ignored?

He didn't understand, his mother wouldn't know, and Willem Korvan had no one else to talk to—no one except Marek Rymiit.

Willem stood and smoothed his fine wool waistcoat with trembling hands. He didn't bother calling for a coach, though it was a walk of four long blocks from his home to the Thayan Enclave. He breathed deeply of the summer air, and as he walked he tried not to make eye contact with any of the people who strolled the lanternlit streets. He knew that too many of them—especially the ones who
made a point to cross the street when they caught sight of him—had been on his guest list.

When he presented himself at the gates to the enclave, he was admitted without question, as though the guards had been told to expect him. As he passed through the tall wrought-iron gate, Willem tried to remember when Marek Rymiit had hired guards. He looked up at the building as he approached the door, and though parts of it were familiar, much of it had changed—too much of it, he thought, since the last time he'd been there. But then, try as he might, he didn't quite remember exactly when he'd last been there—anyway, not long enough for the grand house to be converted into what more closely resembled a castle bailey: a cluster of buildings inside a walled enclosure.

"Senator?" the guard said, even that one word thick with the peculiar, gruff accent of Thay. When Willem stopped to look at him, the guard continued, "The master will see you in his private study."

Willem nodded, not sure what that meant or where he should go. Obviously sensing that confusion, the guard motioned for him to follow and led him to a low stone house—for all appearances a pleasant country cottage surrounded by flowering bushes. The warm orange glow of candles pulsed in the windows, and when the door swung silently open, the familiar round shape of Marek Rymiit filled the doorway.

"Ah, Willem, my boy," he said, his voice as warm and welcoming as the cottage itself, "do come in."

The guard bowed and backed away, and Willem stepped up to the door then hesitated when Marek didn't move out of the way. Instead the Thayan stepped forward and before Willem could back away—and his instincts insisted he at least try—the wizard's arms enfolded him in what was, if anything, too warm an embrace.

"Ah, Willem," Marek whispered in his ear. The Thayan's breath was

hot and thick with the cloying aroma of elven brandy. "You know you are always welcome here."
Willem stood rigid in the older man's embrace, but Marek either didn't notice or didn't mind. The Thayan released him and stepped aside. Willem staggered into the room.
"Sit," Marek said. "Brandy?"
Willem took in his surroundings with some surprise. He'd known Marek Rymiit for a long time, and thought he had some sense of the Thayan's tastes, which ran to the finer things—the more exotic. His "private study" was just the opposite. The room was everything one would expect from a peasant grandmother's country cottage. Though he suspected the decorations had been chosen to put people at ease, Willem grew only more anxious as he lowered himself into a leather armchair. Though he hadn't asked for one, Marek poured him a glass of brandy and set it on the little table next to Willem's chair.
"Why the long face?" the wizard asked as he lowered his girth into the chair opposite.
"What happened, Master Rymiit?"
The Thayan smiled at that and shrugged.
Willem took a deep breath, and wondered how to even begin.
"Really, my boy," Marek went on, swirling the brandy glass under his nose, "there's no reason to be so glum, now is there?"
"Isn't there?" Willem asked. "I'm being..." "You're being...?"
"I can't remember things," Willem said before he realized he was saying the words aloud. "I don't know what's happened to me."
"You're fine, my boy."
Words caught in Willem's throat and he made a little coughing sound.
The Thayan took a little sip of brandy then said, "They didn't come to your little party."
A tear welled up in Willem's right eye and he wiped it away with the back of his hand. He let his head hang on his neck, looking down at the wood floor.
"I have bad dreams," Willem whispered. He was afraid to say the words, but more afraid not to. "I wake up drenched in sweat, my teeth clenched so hard my head aches. Most of the time my hands are curled into fists and I can't open them."
Willem looked at his hands, both of which were balled into tight fists. He didn't bother trying to open them.
"It's summer already," Willem went on. "I don't remember spring. I think I don't."
"It will all be fine," the Thayan said. "You'll see. Try not to think too hard about all this. We all have nightmares. We all forget things. We all have days when we feel we have no friends in the world, when we feel all of Toril has somehow gotten together to forget us all at once,

but that's hardly reason to hang your head in misery, crying into your friend and patron's expensive elven spirits."
"I'm sorry," Willem all but gasped.
"Wait a month," Marek went on, ignoring Willem's apology. "In a month, all your friends will come back to you. It will be as if nothing ever happened."
"But..." Willem breathed, looking up into the Thayan's face, "what happened?"
"Nothing," Marek said with a wide grin. "In a month, at any rate."
"But how?"
"I'll tell them to," said Marek. "We will all be fast friends and close associates once more, because I will tell them as much."
Willem swallowed, looked at the glass of brandy on the table next to him, but didn't reach for it.
"You can do that?" Willem whispered, his eyes still on the glass.
"Don't think too much of me," the wizard said with a laugh. "I am but a small piece in a much larger puzzle. Still, if you need anything... anything at all... I am here for you."
"No," Willem said, forcing his attention from the glass to Marek's big, wet eyes. "No, Master Rymiit, it is I who am here for you. Always."
Marek laughed in a way that made the hair on the back of Willem's neck stand on end.
36_
5 Eleasias, the Yearof Rogue Dragons (1373 DR) First Quarter, Innarlith
Wenefir didn't know the names of either of the two black firedrakes. They looked so much alike they might have been twins. Both had black hair and dusky skin, with eyes blacker than any human's. They wore thick black leather ring mail vests, and even their boots were of the same design and materials. The only thing that was different about the two was the way they stood: One of them set all his weight on his left foot. The other leaned on the thick haft of his longaxe. There was something about the way they smelled that Wenefir found unpleasant.
The night breeze brought the stench of sulfur from the Lake of Steam, and Wenefir couldn't smell the firedrakes anymore. He blinked in the darkness and gazed down the length of the long pier. The ship that was tied there—a sturdy cog out of Calimport—bumped the piling with a hollow thud, and a wave broke, sending a few drops of water into Wenefir's face. The priest blinked the acidic water from his eyes. He didn't want to take even one hand from the haft of his mace to wipe the water away.
He glanced down at the platinum-inlaid mithral of the weapon's fierce head and smiled. His hands tightened around the polished wooden haft. The weapon felt good in his hands.

A clatter of wood on wood made him jump, and a cool sweat broke out on his forehead. He blinked again and
watched the zombie work gang unload the cog while the Calishite crew drank away their meager earnings in some quayside tavern. The zombies weren't careful, and they were slow—so slow it was difficult for someone like Wenefir to watch them without feeling frustrated, even though he couldn't possibly care less whether or not the Calishite ship was unloaded in a timely fashion.
Wenefir sniffed the air. The sulfur from the water, and a hint of the black firedrake's acidic musk assaulted his nostrils, but the priest couldn't detect even a trace of rotting flesh. By the look of the half dozen animated corpses a few yards away from him, the stench of rotting flesh should have been unbearable.
"What do you smell?" one of the black firedrakes whispered.
Wenefir shook his head.
"Master Rymiit made them that way," the firedrake said. Wenefir couldn't place his accent. "The sailors and captains were complaining."
Wenefir shrugged and silenced the firedrake with the hint of a smile.
The three of them watched the zombies work, and as they watched, they listened. One of the firedrakes tipped his head up and sniffed at the warm summer breeze.
"I smell it, too," the other black firedrake whispered. "They're here."
Wenefir nodded and brought the mace up in front of his chest. He kept his eyes on the zombies and heard footsteps on the pier before he saw anyone. They came from the end of the pier, as though they'd come from the open water. The black firedrakes fanned out to either side of them. Wenefir couldn't hear them—not a creak of leather or the tap of a boot heel on the planks.
The women stepped into the meager light from the one lantern the cog's captain had left burning for the zombie work gang. Wenefir recognized them both immediately. He brought a prayer to mind, and when he was ready,
he made eye contact with one of the black firedrakes. They stepped out of the shadows together, but the second firedrake remained cloaked in the shadows of the night-dark pier.
Wenefir coughed out the harsh words to the prayer and felt Cyric's temperamental grace well up within him. The older of the two women heard him first. She gasped, reached out to grab the younger woman's forearm, and took a step back. A zombie carrying a crate passed between them, oblivious to the presence of the women, the Cyricist, and the black firedrake.
The force of the prayer swept out from Wenefir's hands. He could feel it drape itself over the two women. The black firedrake didn't wait to see if it had any effect. He stepped forward with his longaxe high over

his head. Stepping nimbly around one of the slowly-shambling zombies, the firedrake brought his axe down in a blow that would have split the older woman in two if she hadn't slipped out of the way with reflexes so sharp and precise they had to be magical—or spiritual—in nature.

The younger woman shivered and opened her mouth as if to scream, but made no sound. She was frozen in place, unable to move.

The black firedrake growled and spun, reversing his longaxe to try to take the older woman's head off, but she waved her hand in front of her and the heavy, razor-sharp blade pinged off a wide metal bracer on her forearm, sending a shower of blue-white sparks arcing in the night air—more magic.

The black firedrake answered by vomiting in her face—or so it appeared to Wenefir. A spray of thin black fluid missed her head and only a little bit of it spattered against her shoulder as she once more dodged with superhuman speed.

She clutched a holy symbol that hung from a cord around her neck—the hated device of Chauntea—and began a staccato obeisance of her own.

"Cahlo," Wenefir said, and the mace glowed with an eerie blue light. He stepped forward to face the priestess and said, "These zombies belong to the ransar."

A flash of yellow light blazed, so bright and so sudden Wenefir had to look away. He brought the mace up instinctively to block it, but it didn't do much good. He had to blink spots from his eyes and hope he had the few heartbeats he needed to clear his vision. The black firedrake that had spit acid at the priestess cursed in a language Wenefir didn't understand—but curses are unmistakable in any language.

Yellow light shone from the firedrake's eyes. The priestess had placed the spell expertly, so that its illumination covered the black firedrake's eyes, doing more than simply blinding him. He clawed at his face and staggered backward, his longaxe lying on the pier at his feet.

"This abomination has gone on long enough," the Chauntean priestess announced. "In the name of the—"

Her oath came to a stop with the sound of a butcher's blade cutting meat. She staggered forward, gasping for air, and the black firedrake behind her passed into the light. The feral, animal look in his eyes gave even Wenefir pause. He glanced at the younger woman, still glued to the same spot a few steps away. The look of sheer terror on her face made the Cyricist smile.

The older woman began another prayer, but her words gurgled in her own blood. The black firedrake opened its mouth and coughed out a cloud of black mist that enveloped her head. The sound of the

priestess's scream as her head dissolved would stay with Wenefir for the rest of his life. When the headless body dropped to the planks one of the zombies tripped over it and went sprawling facefirst at the younger woman's feet.

The undead stevedore struggled to its feet and continued on its way to the gangplank and back into the cog's hold for another crate. Wenefir watched it go then turned

to the girl, who was still stuck in place, and stepped close to her.

She looked him in the eye with a look of stern defiance startlingly at odds with the utter terror he'd seen in her eyes scant moments before.

Wenefir looked down at the mace in his hands, glowing with its cold blue light. He held it to her face and when it was close enough to really light her features, the unnatural cold radiating from it made frost spread across her cheek. One of her eyes started to close as her skin tightened, and pain made a tear well up in the other one.

"I'm sorry, Halina," Wenefir said. "Is that cold?"

She showed him her teeth in a sneer of contempt and said, "Have you stopped toadying around for Pristoleph now, Wenefir? Did my uncle buy you from him?"

Wenefir laughed in her face and said, "Inflae."

The cold was gone in the blink of an eye and the mace burst into flames. Halina whimpered and, try as she might to back away from the searing heat, she still couldn't move. A blister began to rise on her already frost-burned cheek.

"You've been a bad, bad girl," Wenefir said. "Your uncle is very disappointed in you."

Wenefir dropped his hand just a little and touched the flaming mace to the girl's robes. They caught easily enough and she screamed when the fire touched her soft skin.

"Too bad, really," Wenefir said, backing away.

"I escaped him!" Halina screamed. "I did more than you!"

Wenefir smiled at that, then stepped out of the way to let a zombie carrying a crate pass by him.

"Yes," he said to the burning girl, "I suppose you have."

They waited for her to die before putting her out with water from the Lake of Steam, so as not to burn down the pier. When she'd cooled sufficiently to touch, they pushed her and the older priestess off the end of the pier and into the black water.

37

17 Eleasias, the Yearof Rogue Dragons (1373 DR) The Canal Site

H ow long has it been?" Willem asked.

Ivar Devorast looked at him—looked him in the eye. Willem didn't remember the last time he'd done that. Though it was never easy to read Devorast's expression, Willem was sure he finally could. It was

confusion Willem saw in his old friend's face. The look was what would come before, "Are you well? Have you been ill? What has happened to you?" But Devorast didn't say any of those things.
"Six years," he answered instead.
Willem nodded, puzzled over that length of time. He couldn't decide if six years seemed like too long, or not long enough.
"I wonder sometimes," Willem said, "if it was evenme who met you all those years ago, in school. Did you really let a room from my mother? Did we really come here, and ... ?"
Devorast didn't answer. He never answered questions like that, rhetorical questions, questions from the verge of panic.
Willem tipped his face up into the hot wind. The clear blue sky left the sun unfiltered and Willem felt as though he'd stepped into a blast furnace. The light hurt his eyes. He was sweating, and he hated sweating.
"What brings you here?" Devorast asked him.
Willem closed his eyes and ran his fingers through his hair. He wanted to answer, but he couldn't form a thought much less the words. He looked over at Devorast, who stood, still as always, and waited for an answer.
Willem smiled and said, "That's what I must have looked like, all those times I stood there, waiting for you
to answer, waiting for anything from you but the least you could give."
Devorast stood and waited, and that made Willem laugh.
"I haven't laughed in a long time," he said to himself, then stepped to the lip of the stone-lined trench.
He stopped with his toes barely a quarter of an inch from the edge. Below him was a sheer drop to the bottom of the canal. The section was finished, and Willem's eyes followed its sharp contours. It was straighter than anything so big had any right to be. The blocks fit together perfectly.
"How deep is it?" Willem asked. The wind took his voice and he was afraid Devorast didn't hear him.
"Thirty feet," Devorast said.
"It seems deeper," Willem said, still looking down. "You've made startling progress, Ivar, really. How far are you from finishing?"
"A year," Devorast replied.
"A year ..." Willem mouthed the word again and puzzled over how foreign it sounded to him.
"What do you want here, Willem?"
Willem sighed and looked up into the clear blue sky. He rocked back on his feet just the tiniest bit, and his face flushed.
"Step back," Devorast said.

Willem took a step backward from the edge, then another, then he turned and walked past Devorast.
"I don't know what's happened to me," Willem said. "I know I look bad. I know that... something is wrong. I think I've done things that are wrong."
"You did what you chose to do," Devorast said.
Willem nodded, though he didn't agree. He couldn't believe that. He had done what he was told to do.
"Can I help you, Ivar?" Willem said. "Will you let me help you finish it?"
"As?"
"As?" Willem asked.
Devorast didn't answer, and Willem paced in a slow
circle for a long moment while he considered the meaning of that one little word.
"You decide what as," Willem said. "I'm not the master builder. I'm only a senator anymore—and even that in name only. Should you ask me to dig a hole I'll dig it. Ask me to carry stone or cut lumber, I'll do it. Let me do something. Give me something to do that will leave something behind to—"
Willem stopped talking because he didn't know what he was saying anymore. He didn't understand himself.
"As?" Willem said. "As a parasite. Let me help you as a less than sensate thing that lives on the blood and flakes of dead skin from—"
He stopped again.
"You told me that you were my enemy once," Devorast said. "You warned me to carry a weapon."
"I've done and said worse than that" Willem replied. He looked at Devorast and was just as relieved that he saw no compassion in the man's face as he was to see no anger. "I can fall to my knees, if you like. I can grovel."
"That won't be necessary," Devorast said with the barest hint of a smile.
Willem nodded and laughed in a way that didn't feel as good as before, but made him feel tired.
"Can I help you?" he asked.
Devorast replied, "I'll think about it."
Willem nodded, looked at the ground, and smiled. He looked up at Devorast, who was looking at his canal, and Willem grinned wider. A tear rolled down his cheek, and it felt good.
38_
17 Eleasias, the Yearof Rogue Dragons (1373 DR) Pristal Towers, Innarlith
Jtr hyrea didn't realize she touched her own chest when she said to

the woman, "Your brooch is beautiful."
The woman smiled in a way that made Phyrea feel at once embarrassed and delighted. She had to look away.
"Thank you, Lady," the woman said in a voice so devoid of guile it was like a salve to Phyrea's ears. She'd spent so much of her life among the aristocracy of Innarlith that anything that wasn't a hateful lie seemed like music. "It is the symbol of my faith."
Phyrea smiled, feeling like a little girl.
"And what is it precisely that I can do for you, Sister?" Pristoleph asked." 'Sister' is the proper form of address, I hope."
He motioned the woman to a seat around a grand table. The dining salon, like many of the rooms in the cavernous expanse of Pristal Towers, was like a museum of artifacts and antiquities from all corners of Toril. They only dined there with visiting dignitaries, foreign merchants, and other people Pristoleph wanted to impress.
The woman smiled as she slid into one of the high-backed chairs. Over the gentle hiss of her flowing white silk robes she said, "I am known as 'Mother,' but you may address me as you wish, Ransar."
" 'Mother' it is, then," Phyrea said, shooting a stern glance Pristoleph's way. He returned the expression with a little grin and they too sat. "Welcome to our home."
"Thank you," said the high priestess, first to Phyrea, then Pristoleph. "I'm afraid, Ransar, that we must discuss a matter of some delicacy."
Phyrea watched her husband and saw that Pristoleph knew full well what the high priestess had come to say. He nodded and Phyrea saw that the woman could see the same.
"For many years," the woman said, "the Sisterhood of Pastorals has stood outside the civil politics of the city-state. For decades, even. But events occasionally force us to do otherwise."
"And some such event has occurred?" Pristoleph asked.
Phyrea's skin crawled.
You like the brooch, the little girl said. Phyrea resisted the urge to turn and look behind her. Instead, she kept her eyes glued on the high priestess, staring at her evenly. The woman glanced at her as she spoke, and Phyrea hoped the woman would see the little girl made of lavender light standing behind her. Take it. You should have it if you want it.
"I fear that that is indeed the case, yes, Ransar," the high priestess said. "Two of our number went missing twelve days ago."
Pristoleph seemed surprised to hear that—sincerely surprised.
What do you call two Chauntean priestesses at the bottom of the Lake of Steam? the little girl snarled.
"Their bodies were found, burned and mutilated, the day before last, floating in the Lake of Steam," the woman said, and Phyrea could

sense the pain it caused her to say those words, but she could not read it in her calm, steady voice.
A good start, the little girl said, and she started to laugh.
The sound made Phyrea's skin crawl, and when the other ghosts joined in, she had to hold her arms close to her body to keep from shivering. The high priestess looked at her, sensing something was wrong, but Phyrea just looked away.
Pristoleph shook his head, his strange red-orange hair reacting in a way that was somehow unexpected. It only rarely moved with his head the way another person's might. His brows knitted in concern, and for a moment Phyrea thought he was legitimately upset by the high priestess's news.
"That's inexcusable, Mother," the ransar said. "Please tell me what I might be able to do to bring to justice the man—or beast—responsible for this outrage."
The woman tipped her head in a sort of bow, but Phyrea didn't think she accepted Pristoleph's concern as sincere.
It is a beautiful piece, the old woman said, her voice grating the inside of Phyrea's skull. 7s that a rose?
Phyrea looked at the brooch again. It was a red rose formed from rubies and emeralds over stalks of wheat very elegantly carved of pure gold. It fastened a shimmering silk cape around the woman's incongruously broad shoulders.
Careful, now, the man with the scar whispered to her. She won't be an easy kill. Not that you shouldn't try.
"Ransar," the woman said, looking Pristoleph in the eye without the slightest trace of doubt or weakness, "I must be frank with you."
"Of course," Pristoleph replied.
The high priestess was about to speak when a servant entered the' room with a platinum-chased silver tray of cheeses and sweet breads. The three of them sat in silence while another servant poured tea and placed small plates and utensils in front of each of them.
When they were finally gone, the priestess said, "We have known for some time that you have been employing undead to work the docks and the canal."
Phyrea held her breath.
Typical, the little girl sneered.
Hush now, the man with the scar cut in. They're zombies she's talking about—less than beasts. What do we care? Pay her no mind, Phyrea.
The ghost of the little girl didn't reply to that, but Phyrea could sense that there was much left unsaid.
"I have," Pristoleph admitted. "I understand that that may not meet with your approval, but I'd hoped we could forgive each other's—" he paused on purpose to sound as though he was choosing his words

carefully—"little indulgences, in the name of peaceful cohabitation."
"And for the longest time," the woman replied, "we turned a blind eye. Now, I must tell you, I am ashamed to admit that."
"All of the zombies have disappeared form the canal site," Pristoleph said. "But then you knew that."
The woman tipped her chin up and gazed back at him with such a look of pure self-confidence it made Phyrea's palms start to sweat.
Oh, the old woman whispered from somewhere in the corner of the huge room, I like this one.
She might be worth the trouble to kill, after all, the scarred man concurred.
"That was a service I'm sure the entire city-state will thank us for, Ransar Pristoleph," said the priestess.
"And you're providing the same service now, on the quayside," he said.
The high priestess nodded and replied, "But, apparently, not without opposition."
"Mother," Pristoleph said, leaning forward to look the woman in the eyes, "you have my assurance as Ransar of Innarlith that I had nothing to do with the deaths of your priestesses. You also have my sincere assurance that my offices are at your disposal in the effort to find those responsible and to bring them to justice."
Phyrea was certain he was telling the truth with the first part, but the first part only, and from the look the high priestess gave him, they shared that opinion.
Phyrea took hold of the little knife the servants had placed in front of her, and while Pristoleph and the high priestess stared each other down, examining each other as one would look for a hairline crack in a piece of expensive pottery, she put her hand under the table.
Well, the man with the scar said, it looks as though you won't have to kill her for that brooch.
Phyrea lifted her skirt with one hand and held the knife with the other. She made her movements slow and quiet so the other woman wouldn't look at her.
"I hope that that is indeed the case, Ransar," the high priestess said.
"It is," Pristoleph assured her.
Phyrea held the blade of the little knife against her bare thigh.
Yes, the old woman cackled, it looks as though your husband is going to do it for—
She stopped when the blade bit into Phyrea's soft flesh.
"And we will agree that it is improper to employ the animated corpses of our fellow citizens as slaves," the high priestess said.
Phyrea closed her eyes against the pain of the cut in her thigh, while at the same time reveling in the silence.
"I like to think I'm the sort of gentleman who can admit when he's

wrong, Mother," Pristoleph said, but his voice was thick with a not-so-subtle warning.
With that, the two of them moved on to niceties and vacuous small talk, in which Phyrea couldn't bring herself to join.
39_
25Eleint, the Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR) The Land of One Hundred and Thirteen
The sky in Marek Rymiit's tiny universe roiled and thundered. The clouds moved in many different directions at once, pulling away from the tall tower of dark stone atop the lone hill. Lightning arced across the horizon, making it appear as though the Land of One Hundred and Thirteen was contained in a cage of blue-white light.
Marek grinned and took a deep breath of air that reeked of dragon and ozone. He looked up again and spied the huge, sinuous form of Insithryllax diving in and out of the tortured gray-black clouds. The dragon's batlike wings caught the air and rode it in great sweeping arcs. The wyrm kept the black firedrakes at a distance, and Marek could only rarely see one of the much smaller forms dart from cloud to cloud closer to the lightning-traced horizon.
The Red Wizard turned his attention to the stone-tiled roof of the tower upon which he stood. Before him, carefully
scribed to sit in the exact center of the cylindrical structure, he had drawn a circle of chalk, blood, and magic. Placed at uneven but carefully delineated points around the circle were six candles made of wax mixed with the blood of an Abyssal tanar'ri—not an easy commodity to get one's hands on, even in Thay.
Looking up once again at the dragon circling high above him, Marek called out, "Stay close! I begin!"
The dragon tipped one wing and waved his head in response and began a sweeping descent toward the roof of the tower.
Marek set his hands in the first of a complex series of uncomfortable gestures and began to chant. The words stung his ears, and the foul language of a malignant civilization millennia dead grated in his dry throat until his voice sounded like the growl of a rabid dog. Ignoring the little aches and pains, the Red Wizard twisted his fingers through the series of gestures, and when he came to the last of them and the final word of the incantation, he took one step back from the circle.
A blue-violet glow traced the outside of the circle, one he'd carefully measured to be precisely sixteen feet in diameter, then poured into the middle as though the light was water filling a low pool from all sides.

Marek smiled when the bright light faded to a deep indigo. He looked up once more and made eye contact with the dragon.
Insithryllax tucked his wings to the sides of his black-scaled body and dived headfirst at the pool of indigo light. Before the dragon reached the top of the tower, a gout of red and black smoke belched from the circle of light, and the air around them was assaulted by the sound of a million people screaming while another million cried. Marek flinched away from the agonized cacophony, but the dragon never wavered in his downward path—not until he was only feet above the circle, which had become a doorway into the heart of the Abyss.
The black dragon spread his wings, and a sound like a great ship's sails catching a stiff wind drowned out the screams of the tormented. Insithryllax stopped in midair for the briefest moment—less than one of Marek's rapid, excited heartbeats—then he dipped his head into the very Abyss itself and came out carrying the writhing form of what at first appeared to be a man.
Holding the squirming form in his mighty jaws, Insithryllax beat his wings once and fell away over the lip of the tower's roof. As the tip of his right wing dropped from sight, Marek brought his hands together in a firm clap. The sound sent a shudder through the stone floor and the gate sent out a deafening crack in response. The candles and the circle both were gone, and a waft of acrid smoke remained, but otherwise the doorway to the horrific plane of chaos and evil was closed.
The Red Wizard took a deep breath and smiled, waiting.
Insithryllax, with a flapping of wings that made Marek stagger backward and hold onto a battlement lest he be blown over the side, rose above the roof. Like a cat toying with a mouse, the dragon snapped his neck and tossed the writhing form onto the roof. The gray-skinned creature rolled to a stop but was instantly on its feet and hissing its infernal rage at the black wyrm. Ignoring it, Insithryllax took wing, and before the demon even noticed Marek standing only a few feet away, the dragon was lost to the clouds.
"Be at peace, maurezhi," Marek said.
The creature spun on him. The Red Wizard could feel its gray eyes fix on him though they held no iris or pupil. Its sinuous, grotesquely naked form was well muscled, especially in its legs, which were disproportionately huge compared to its upper body and head. Its feet were like a crocodile's, with four big, pointed talons of yellowing, fungus-ravaged bone. It hissed at him, showing a mouth full of razor edged fangs.
"Calm yourself," Marek said, passing a hand in front of the creature to enact a spell. "Be calm, so we can speak."

The maurezhi seemed to deflate. It closed its mouth and stepped back, reaching out behind itself to lean against a battlement. Its eyes were the only part of it that didn't seem to slow. They darted around, taking in the strict confines of the pocket dimension.
Insithryllax dived from out of the clouds and the demon watched it circle the tower once then land with startling grace on the battlements. Then the tanar'ri turned its attention back to Marek.
What are you? the thing hissed directly into Marek's head in a voice like breaking glass. Human? What is this place?
"I am indeed human," the Red Wizard said, stepping away from the demon but still exuding all the confidence he felt. "You will call me Master."
The demon flinched at that and said, Master what?
Marek snapped his fingers and the demon's forearm snapped. The creature howled in agony and grabbed the twisted limb. Its clawed hand hung limp at the end of it.
"You will call me Master," the Red Wizard repeated.
Y-yes... the maurezhi begged, dipping its head low, ... Master.
"Good," Marek replied with a smile, and he snapped his fingers again.
The demon shrieked when its arm snapped back into place, then worried at it with its claws, surprised that it was not only repaired but that the pain was gone. Marek grinned, doubting the maurezhi would soon forget that lesson.
Why was I snatched from my torments, Master? the demon asked, and Marek could tell it still struggled with the title.
"Do you hunger?" the Red Wizard asked. Always, Master, the demon replied. Always. Marek remembered well his lessons on demonology. The vile maurezhi feasted on the flesh of their victims, and when they were done, they could assume the form of their former meal, only to move ever deeper into human society to eat, and eat, and eat.
"You will feast, then," Marek promised it. "You will go to a human city on the world of Toril, and there you will find and devour a man named Pristoleph."
Pristoleph__the demon repeated, nodding, and a great drop of yellowish drool hung from the side of its black lips.
The dragon huffed and Marek turned his attention to the huge wyrm perched on the battlements and sneering down at the demon.
"Yes, my friend?" the Red Wizard asked.
"Isn't Pristoleph surrounded by black firedrakes?" Insithryllax said.
"He is, yes," Marek replied.
"And you feel you have to summon this thing from a universe away rather than just give the creatures you created yourself a single order?"
"The black firedrakes were created to serve the Ransar of Innarlith,"

Marek said.
The dragon smiled a little and Marek tensed under the dragon's scrutiny—a look that came painfully, infuriat-ingly close to patronizing.
"If you'll watch and see," Marek continued, "all will become clear to you, I'm sure. Really, Insithryllax. Where has your patience gone?"
The Red Wizard turned back to the demon and said, "Yes, Pristoleph. But first, you must wear a disguise."
The demon's form blurred. It stood more erect and its legs shrank. Clothing formed around it almost as though it was weaving itself from the thin air. In a breath or two the monstrous entity had been replaced by a black-skinned man in rough-spun clothes. The gray eyes turned white and circles of deep, penetrating brown formed in their centers.
"Nicely done," Marek said, and the transformed maurezhi
smiled a broad, gap-toothed grin. "But not precisely what I had in mind."
Marek cast a spell and the demon in its human form shrank away, holding up arms that even then began to lose their healthy color to return to that pallid, awful gray. It was only back in its natural form for a moment before its legs came together, its joints popped, and its skin tore.
The demon howled in pain, but the transformation didn't take long.
It looked down at itself, confused at first, but then the admiration for its new shape was written plainly on its new face. The demon twitched its new body, testing its own ability to move like a snake moves. Its face looked more human than it had moments before, but when it opened its mouth, a long, thin tongue that ended in a fork flicked over its lips.
"There," the Red Wizard said, "that's better. Now, since I know you'll be loath to tell me your name, I'll have to give you a new one."
"A name?" the demon asked aloud, surprised by the hissing sibilance of its new voice.
"Svayyah," Marek said.

25 Eleint, the Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR) Pristal Towers, Innarlith
Iristoleph sat on a cool marble bench, letting the late summer sun that shone through the skylights and windows warm his already burning hot skin. The room was the uppermost floor of the second tallest tower of his magnificent manor home. From nearly a hundred feet in the air, the city looked peaceful, even beautiful, and Pristoleph often found himself drawn to that lofty space to sit alone and think.
His eyes drifted lazily from one of the sixteen triangular windows to one of the sixteen statues lined up along the

walls of the octagonal room. He'd collected the statues for years, finding them in all corners of the world. Some were very old—older even than the ancient empire of Netheril— and others he'd had commissioned from the artists himself, the newest one only a few months before.

He turned his face back up to the skylights, which, like the windows in the tall, straight side walls, were triangles cut from the pyramidal roof. Through the skylights he could see the long orange pennant spreading itself along the gusty wind from its pole at the apex of the pointed roof.

Uncharacteristically calm, even content—if such a thing could be imagined from a man like Pristoleph—he took a deep breath and smiled.

But his smile faded almost as quickly as it came to his lips. A strange feeling nettled at the back of his neck, and though he didn't remember hearing anything, he could swear his ears had something akin to an aftertaste, the feeling of having heard something. He turned to look behind him but he was still alone in the big room. The statues all stood mute sentinel around the perimeter, staring out at nothing with eyes of marble, bronze, and wood.

In the center of the room, ringed by an ornamental railing of polished brass, was a hole down which a spiral stairway sank into the room below. Even as Pristoleph assured himself that there was no one on the stair, a scuffle of booted feet sounded from below, and the head of one of his black firedrake guards appeared, scanning the room with a furrowed brow over his coal-black eyes. He saw Pristoleph and came up to the top of the stairs.

"Ransar?" the firedrake said. "All is well?"

"I believe so, Sergeant Nevor," Pristoleph said, "but I have the strangest—"

Pristoleph was silenced by the black firedrake's shuddering, strangled cry of shock and pain. The dark-skinned, black-clad man's knees buckled and he dropped

to the floor—not dead, but nearly so. His longaxe clattered onto the wood floor next to him. Pristoleph stood as the huge, terrifying form of a water naga shimmered into existence. It stood just at the top of the stairs, behind Nevor, and by the way it held its right hand, Pristoleph could tell that it was the naga's touch that had felled his guard.

But not his only guard.

"Firedrakes!" Pristoleph called.

The naga, slithering on its blue-green scales, charged him, its clawed hands out in front of it, its fangs bared and its forked tongue flicking in and out of its mouth.

"Firedrakes, to me!"
Pristoleph drew the dagger from his belt and tried to jump to the side to avoid the charging naga, but his shin clipped the marble bench. He fell to his right and the naga slithered past him, raking along the left side of his chest and digging ragged furrows in his skin that flared with burning pain.
He let loose a hissing curse as the dagger fell from his hand. He clambered away from the naga, literally crawling across the floor.
The naga surged forward at him, and he grabbed for the . dagger. The weapon looked small, hopelessly insufficient when compared to the bulk of the massive creature, but it was enchanted to bite a little deeper, hurt a little more, and slice a little faster than any ordinary dagger. Pristoleph didn't usually come to his statue gallery armed at all, so he had to be thankful that he'd thought to carry the dagger with him that day.
Surging above him, the naga opened its eyes wide and hissed at him, the humanlike, feminine face and arms the only thing about it that wasn't a hellish serpent. Pristoleph felt a tingling wash over his body and he rolled away. A burst of panic welled up within him.
"Guards!" he screamed, and only then heard them coming up the stairs.
The naga heard it too and backed off enough to look at the stairs without giving Pristoleph too easy an opening with his dagger. The ransar picked up the knife with a shaking hand and paused long enough to fight back the fear. He could feel it fall away as suddenly as it came, and there was something about the feeling that made him think it came from outside him—it must have been some foul magic of the naga's.
Nevor tried to get to his feet but couldn't. When a black firedrake in its bestial, dragonlike form, swooped up the stairs, it almost tripped over the sergeant.
"Dlavin," the dying sergeant gasped, and Pristoleph was thankful that Nevor had named the drake. In their natural forms, Pristoleph could never tell one from another. "To the ransar."
Nevor fell to the floor again, breathing but unconscious, and Dlavin took wing just long enough to hit the wood floor between Pristoleph and the naga.
"Kill it!" Pristoleph barked, and before the words were even out of his mouth, the winged creature belched forth a cloud of black acid that sprayed over the naga.
Pristoleph could hear it sizzle, and he climbed to his feet, watching and waiting for the serpent to dissolve before his eyes. But that didn't happen. The naga winced at what appeared to be a minor burn, then smiled into the black firedrake's reptilian face.

The acid should have killed it.
Fighting down the fear again, Pristoleph tightened his grip on his dagger and glanced over to the/Stairs to see two more guards—Varnol, in his human guise—and a second firedrake in its dragonlike form emerge from the room below. It took them both all of a heartbeat to figure out what was going on and rush to the aid of the ransar.
Dlavin, surprised that his acid had so little effect on the naga, lunged to meet the serpent's own charge. Pristoleph started to step to the side to flank the creature and try to slit its throat while it was caught up in a clawing grapple
with Dlavin, but his foot wouldn't move. He managed to bring the dagger up in front of his chest, then every muscle in his body locked in place.
A hideous, keening voice sounded in Pristoleph's head, Stand and watch while I devour your guards, Pristoleph, then you will know what it's like to be eaten alive while you cannot even scream your last breath.
Pristoleph's skin crawled, but the rest of his body remained immobile. He hoped that he'd only imagined the voice, but he knew it was the naga.
Dlavin's left wing tore free under the assault of the naga's ragged claws, and the black firedrake shot out more acid while it screamed in rage and agony. The naga took the fullness of the acid in its face and blinked and spat. The dazzling blue of its eyes faded into white, then the white turned to gray, and though he couldn't express it, Pristoleph thrilled at the thought that his firedrake had managed to blind the thing.
Dlavin fell to the floor, already bleeding to death, and on came Varnol with his longaxe. The stout wooden beams that held up the pyramidal ceiling were well enough above the black firedrake's reach that even with the weapon's long haft, he could hold it straight up above his head in an effort to bring it down onto the top of the naga's head.
The blue in the naga's eyes reappeared and it looked up at the axe coming down hard and fast. The serpent creature twisted away, but the axe still took off its right ear. Blood poured out, then more when the axe bit deeply into the naga's shoulder. The creature screamed—at least it sounded like a scream—and slithered back away from Varnol, who wrenched his axe head out of the monster's shoulder with a wet crack.
The second firedrake in its dragon form leaped at the naga, but the serpent looked up at him and disappeared. When the firedrake came down it landed on the floor next to its fallen comrade and whirled to find its foe, but the naga was nowhere to be seen.

The firedrakes cast about, Varnol with his axe in front of him, the other taking wing to roost in the rafters twenty feet above the floor.
Pristoleph tried to speak, but his jaw was locked closed, and all he could manage was to grind his teeth. Frustration and rage made his skin grow hotter and hotter, until Varnol finally felt it, glanced at him, and stepped away.
"Ransar?" Varnol asked. "Are you unable to move?"
Pristoleph just looked at him, hoping his total inability to answer would suffice as a "Yes."
"Moraahl," Varnol said, looking up at the firedrake in the rafters. "The ransar is paralyzed. Fly down and summon a priest. I think the naga has fled."
Pristoleph tried to take a deep breath, but he could draw only enough air to sustain himself. He wanted to warn them that the naga was likely still in the room but simply couldn't be seen. The firedrake named Moraahl leaped from the rafters and lit at the top of the stairs.
It was at that moment that Pristoleph saw the blood on the floor. A drop first, then another, then too many to count. They appeared on the floor as if from nowhere—as if from the gaping wound of an unseen naga.
Moraahl looked at Varnol and opened his crocodile-like jaws to speak when Nevor suddenly rolled over, shook, groaned, and died. The naga appeared next to him, its hand on the dead firedrake's chest. The wound in the naga's shoulder was partially closed, but the side of its head was still a mess of bloody pulp. Blood still flowed, but not as much and not as quickly.
Moraahl didn't get a chance to turn before the naga punched out with its left hand, digging deep into the black scales on Moraahls's right side, just under his wing. The firedrake gurgled out a gout of acid that succeeded only in further ruining Pristoleph's floor. The naga yanked back hard and came out with the still-beating, black heart of the firedrake it its clawed fist. Moraahl
had time only to blink and close his mouth before he fell over dead.
Pristoleph began to panic then. The thing was making quick work of his black firedrakes, and he couldn't move a muscle.
Terrible, isn't if? the naga asked, invading his mind.
Pristoleph didn't give it the satisfaction of a reply. Instead he put all his concentration into moving his elbow. All he wanted was to move that one elbow. While the ransar busied himself with that, Varnol charged the naga, his longaxe swinging in arcs before him so fast the weapon became but a silver blur. The air quivered with the sound of its slicing and reversing, slicing and reversing.
The naga backed away from the onslaught and its face twisted in strange, unreadable expressions. Pristoleph got the feeling it was

trying to cast some spell or bring to bear some magical ability, but there was no visible effect on the firedrake. A sound from one side of the room stole Pristoleph's attention from his elbow and he saw a dead-pale hand with nails like sharpened talons fold itself over the hip of a statue. What emerged was an undead thing so hideous Pristoleph had to force himself to look at it. A stench of decay and putrescence filled the room, and Pristoleph cursed the naga anew for leaving him so he Could only breathe through his nose.

The sound of feet dragging on wood revealed that there was at least one more of the creatures—ghouls, Pristoleph decided—in the room with him. The one he could see hissed at the naga then looked Pristoleph in the eye. Its deformed lips twisted into a fang-lined grin, and it shambled forward from behind the statue. Pristoleph couldn't even begin to imagine where it had come from.

But even as Pristoleph began to consider what it would feel like to be eaten alive, the black firedrake that had lain bleeding at his feet stood in front of him, staggering and almost falling to put himself between his master and the ghoul.

Dlavin, missing a wing and still slowly but surely bleeding to death, surged forward, stumbled again, but met the ghoul near the stairs. The undead creature lunged with its claws extended but never got within reach of the firedrake before a cloud of acidic mist mushroomed in its face.

The ghoul staggered backward, clawing at its face and tearing free great strips of flesh, revealing the bone beneath. It had no skin on its face at all when it finally fell still.

But Dlavin also fell, sprawling on the floor next to it. The black firedrake crawled, ever so weak, to the top of the stairs and let loose a roar that rattled the windows. The sound, was suddenly choked off, though, when the second ghoul landed on the firedrake's back and began to rip huge bites of flesh out of him in bloody mouthfuls. Dlavin twitched and grunted, trying to shake the thing off, but all he could really do was wait for the one bite that would finally kill him. The ghoul took its time.

The naga screamed when it finally reached the wall, fetched up with its back to one of the triangular windows, and took a bloody slice from Varnol's longaxe.

At precisely the same moment, Dlavin shuddered once and died; the ghoul spat out the killing bite and fell back with acid dissolving its pale, vein-streaked chest.

The naga smashed out the window behind it. Pristoleph could only watch as the naga grabbed the windowsill and fell backward out into the open air. Varnol tried to cut off its fingers with his axe, but the naga was too fast. It climbed up the stonework exterior of the tower,

and Pristoleph, unable to tip his head up, could only see it pass over one of the skylights.
The firedrake that had burned the ghoul leaped up out of the stairwell, making way for another of its kind. Both held longaxes.
"This way!" Varnol shouted. "It's on the roof!"
The two firedrakes glanced at Pristoleph as if awaiting
further instructions, but then surged ahead to the broken window.
"Zevok," Varnol said to one of the firedrakes, "the ransar has been paralyzed. Stay with him."
Zevok, one of the black firedrakes Pristoleph didn't remember ever meeting—he hadn't personally introduced himself to all of them—crossed the room to stand next to his ransar, his longaxe held ready in front of his chest. He scanned the carnage in the room with concern but no fear.
Varnol and the other firedrake shifted into their true forms—it was a process Pristoleph never quite got used to—and leaped out of the window in pursuit of the naga.
All at once Pristoleph's neck moved. His head tipped up. Then he could bend his elbow, but just a little. He tried to take a deep breath. Though what he managed couldn't have been described as "deep," he did draw in more than the slightest bit of air.
He looked up at the fight on the roof and saw the firedrakes harrying the naga, which clung to the flagpole. The pole began to bend under the creature's considerable weight, and it took a few painful rakes of the firedrake's claws. The orange pennant—sixteen feet long, Pristoleph remembered—made getting closer to the naga difficult for the two firedrakes, but they pressed on, trying to bleed dry their foe while at the same time not allowing themselves to become tangled in the flag.
Pristoleph took a step forward and opened his mouth just a little. He managed a small sound, not quite a word, and Zevok leaned in closer to hear.
Still looking up, Pristoleph watched as a shimmering glow appeared in the air next to the naga, and a portion of the blue sky for all appearances in the shape of a door, opened onto what looked like a roiling thunderstorm. Pristoleph got only the vaguest glimpse of fast-moving gray-black clouds and a flash of lightning that briefly lit the naga a shocking yellow. Then the serpent creature fell sideways into the space.
The two firedrakes flexed their wings to follow, but the door in the sky slammed shut and they flew instead through empty air and followed each other in a long, swooping circle around the tower.

Surero's hands shook and his hair stood on end. The black firedrake's grip on his arm was more than firm, but it wasn't painful—not yet. He stood still, holding his hands away from his body as he was instructed. He tried to ignore the smell of acid that drifted from the dark-skinned guard. Surero knew that smell, and the fact that it was coming from the man's breath was, for the alchemist, more frightening than the gleam of his razor-sharp axe.

He looked at Ivar Devorast, who stood at the edge of the trench, so far north they were only a few miles from the banks of the Nagaflow. Devorast was flanked by two of the black-clad guards. He looked back at Surero and the way he tipped his head and widened his eyes said, Just be quiet and don't resist... until we know we have to.

It had taken a very, very long time before he was able to read Devorast that well.

Three more of the black firedrakes stood a few yards away, their vicious longaxes held at the ready, scanning the growing crowd of workers that had come to see what all the fuss was about. The men kept a respectful distance, but Surero could feel a rising tension in the air. The men liked Devorast, and everyone was suspicious of the black firedrakes.

One of the firedrakes looked up into the overcast sky and blinked a few times. Surero couldn't tell if he was listening to something or smelling the air. After a brief

moment he looked at Devorast and said, "Kneel to receive the ransar."

Devorast didn't have a chance to bend his knee before the two black firedrakes pushed him to the muddy ground. Surero was likewise forced down.

There was a blur of violet-blue light and a prickling in the air. Surero squinted, ready to close his eyes tightly should something explode or ... he didn't know what else.

Pristoleph stepped out of the light, emerging from the air itself, and the uncomfortable feeling was gone.

The black firedrakes stiffened to attention while the ransar walked past them in a straight line to Devorast. The moment he was within reach, Pristoleph slapped Devorast so hard across the face, he was knocked out of the grip of one of the firedrakes. There was a moment of confusion while the guards struggled to get Devorast back to his knees. Pristoleph stepped back, shaking his hand and rubbing his wrist. Blood oozed from the side of Devorast's lip.

"Did you send it to kill me?" Pristoleph said, his voice grinding with anger. "Or did it decide on its own?"

Devorast jerked his arm away from one of the firedrakes to wipe the blood from his face. The guard was about to hit him, but Pristoleph waved him off.

"Let him up," the ransar said.
Devorast stood and the black firedrakes didn't hold him, but stayed close enough to kill him in the blink of an eye should the ransar order it.
"Speak," Pristoleph demanded.
"I didn't send anyone to kill anyone," Devorast said.
"You said they were under control," Pristoleph seethed.
Devorast just looked at him with a question in his eyes,
"The nagas," Pristoleph said.
"We are the embodiments of the ideal, genasi," a voice at once resonant and sibilant said from behind Surero.
The black firedrake that held Surero released him to hold his axe in both hands. The guards surrounded the ransar, whose strange orange hair seemed to blaze on his head like fire.
Genasi, Surero thought. That explained a lot.
"We are under no monkey's 'control,'" Svayyah said as she slithered just close enough to make the black firedrakes nervous, but not feel as though they had to attack. "What is the meaning of this?"
Pristoleph's eyes widened and Surero got the unmistakable feeling that the ransar recognized the naga. "There you are."
"Here we are," the naga returned, raising the ridge over one eye where, if she had any hair at all, an eyebrow would have been.
"This naga," Pristoleph said, glancing from Svayyah to Devorast, "attacked me in my home. It killed a number of my guards and nearly killed me, too."
"This naga," Svayyah spit back, "did no such thing."
"I have found that Svayyah is as honest as she is direct," Devorast said.
"It was injured..." Pristoleph said, examining the water naga with narrowed eyes. "We took its right ear."
With a wicked little smile, Svayyah turned her head so that Pristoleph could see she was uninjured.
"It wasn't Svayyah," Devorast said. "Our agreement with the water nagas still stands."
Svayyah drew herself up to her full height, her chin held even higher in the air.
"These creatures," Pristoleph said, "all look the same."
A dark looked passed across Svayyah's humanlike face, but passed quickly when they could all see that Pristoleph was thinking—that he wasn't sure, that he was beginning to think he'd been fooled.
He looked Devorast in the eye and said, "Give me your word that the water nagas will honor their agreement. Look me in the eye and tell me it wasn't her."
Devorast looked him in the eye and said, "The water nagas will honor their agreement. It wasn't her."

Svayyah laughed and Pristoleph shot her a dangerous look.
"Release them," the ransar said to the firedrakes, who instantly obeyed.
Surero couldn't help but notice a strange, knowing look pass between two of the black firedrakes, one he couldn't hope to unravel himself. He stayed on his knees until the ransar and his black firedrakes had gone back into the thin air from whence they'd come.
42_
26 Eleint, the Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR) The Land of One Hundred and Thirteen
Insithryllax turned in a tight circle, a hundred feet above the top of Marek's tower. The wailing of the maurezhi demon tore through the dense air, and though the black dragon had heard screams before, of fear mostly but also pain, the sound of those particular cries made his heart quiver in his scaled chest. A demon shouldn't scream like that, and no human—even a Red Wizard—should be able to make one scream at all.
The dragon leaned into an easy descent, holding to his orbit of the tower. He dipped just below the roof line and passed the highest open window. As he flew by, the agonized screams of the demon rattled his ears and chilled his blood.
"... your failure!" Marek Rymiit hollered from the same room—a chamber that comprised the entire top level of the tower.
The demon shrieked anew.
Insithryllax wheeled around the tower, the tip of his left wing almost grazing the rough-cut stone blocks. Movement from the right caught his attention—a fury's eel breaking
the surface of the lake, one of its bulbous, fishlike eyes scanning the tower.
Even the eels can feel it, the great wyrm thought.
He passed the open window again.
"... to fail me like this?" Marek taunted.
The demon panted, and as Insithryllax turned again around the other side of the tower, it began to whimper.
The dragon was impressed on some level that the Thayan had the power to torture a tanar'ri, but the ice in his veins was something else.
Fear? the dragon thought. Could it be?
Once again he passed the window and heard the demon groveling, begging in a language Insithryllax didn't know. He thought he heard the Red Wizard laugh.
When he pulled around the tower once more he riffled his huge, leathery wings, and in one beat of his heart Insithryllax was once again a hundred feet above the tower's roof. He looked down on the tower when the demon started screaming again. The sound had

changed once more. It was desperate, terrified.
Insithryllax looked out to the near horizon and tried to ignore the screaming creature. He'd been in the Land of One Hundred and Thirteen for more than five months. He'd spent longer than that confined to the little pocket dimension in the past, but the last months had been harder. Never had he felt so confined, and the emotions that seethed in him were as intense as they were alien. The anger he'd felt in Innarlith had been replaced by fear.
Insithryllax didn't like fear.
The sound of the maurezhi's screams cut off with a gurgling abruptness that could mean only one thing.
Finding it more difficult to breathe all of a sudden, Insithryllax turned, put even more distance between himself and the ground, and flew off toward the edge of the Land of One Hundred and Thirteen. The fear swelled in him and he choked it down.
He had to get out of there.
43
27 Eleint, the Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR) Pristal Towers, Innarlith
The chain mail was tightly woven, but the steel was dull and heavy. Rolling it between his fingers, Pristoleph tried to imagine how heavy it would be in various configurations: a sort of tunic that would protect his arms and down to his mid-thighs, or just a vest to keep blades from his heart and gut.
The door opened and he turned to watch Wenefir step in while nodding to the black firedrakes that stood guard outside. One of the guards pulled the door closed. Wenefir caught Pristoleph's eye and dipped in a shallow bow.
Pristoleph nodded and turned his attention back to the table. He picked up a square of stout black leather onto which had been sewn a dense pattern of steel rings. It wasn't quite as heavy as the chain mail, but likewise wouldn't provide the same protection—and it was identical to the armor the black firedrakes wore.
"The armorer left samples behind for me to examine at my leisure," the ransar explained, though he knew he didn't have to.
Wenefir stepped up behind him, but not too close, and said, "Is that really necessary?"
Pristoleph shrugged, put down the patch of ring mail, but didn't turn around.
"I think so," he said. "I think it's been necessary for a long time, actually."
"People have tried to kill us before," Wenefir said.
Pristoleph smiled, and turned to face his oldest friend. Wenefir returned his smile from a face that was pale and deeply lined. Wenefir

had aged over the last few years in a way that Pristoleph, with his half-elemental blood, hadn't.
The priest looked pale, as though his skin hadn't seen the sun in a very long time.
"But you think this time it's worse," Wenefir said, the smile fading from his lips.
Pristoleph nodded and reached behind himself to take a small iron box from the tabletop. It opened and he held it out to Wenefir so his seneschal could see what was inside.
Wenefir looked into the box and raised one eyebrow. He swallowed and said, "An ear."
Pristoleph nodded and looked at the ear in the box. It was pointed, like an elf's, but the skin was gray and mottled, sickly.
"The ear of the naga that tried to kill you?" Wenefir said.
"No."
"Something else, then?"
"It was sliced off the side of the naga's head," Pristoleph explained. "I saw it with my own eyes. But when I first placed it in this box it was rounded on the top, like a human ear, and the flesh had a blue cast to it."
"One might expect a disembodied ear to turn gray after-"
"And the shape?" Pristoleph interrupted, then took a deep breath. He didn't like to exhibit the sort of anxiety he felt just then, but if he could trust anyone, it was Wenefir. "I'm sorry, old friend."
Wenefir smiled and said, "No apologies are necessary, Ransar." He cleared his throat and went on, "It could have been ... malformed, when it was shorn from the creature's head."
Pristoleph shook his head and replied, "No. I told you, I put it in the box, and when I opened it again the next day—yesterday—it was different."
"Someone switched it?"
Again the ransar shook his head.
"Of course," said Wenefir, "it was in your possession the whole time."
"It wasn't a water naga that attacked us," Pristoleph said. He closed the lid of the box and held it out to Wenefir. The seneschal looked at it, but Pristoleph could sense his reluctance to take it. "I don't know what it was."
With a slow, pained exhale, Wenefir reached out and took the little iron box from the ransar's hand.
"I need you to tell me what that ear came from," Pristoleph commanded.
Wenefir nodded, but Pristoleph could tell the motion came hard. He looked down at the box in his hands as though he feared it would bite him.

"I know you have ways to find the truth of things," Pristoleph said. "Your own ways..."
Wenefir turned away and started to pace the room. Pristoleph didn't like the way he looked. He could tell when someone was hiding something from him.
"I don't want you to give it to the Thayan," Pristoleph said.
Wenefir stopped and turned his head to look at Pristoleph from the corner of his eye.
"You don't trust Master Rymiit?"
"I don't trust anyone," Pristoleph said. "Someone is trying to kill me."
"And you think it could be Marek Rymiit?"
"It could be," Pristoleph replied. The words almost stuck in his throat. He didn't like to say it aloud, and for reasons he couldn't quite explain, especially to Wenefir. "Whoever it is, it's someone of considerable power."
Wenefir started to pace again.
"One of the other senators, then?" Wenefir asked, and Pristoleph got the feeling his seneschal was trying to lead him in that direction.
"Perhaps," Pristoleph said, confused as to why he felt he needed to humor his old friend. "Any number of them would like to be ransar, and I have enemies to spare in the Chamber of Law and Civility. But this is worse, I think. It's not just a grab for power. Whoever it is may not even be trying to kill me so much as trying to turn me against Devorast."
"Devorast?" Wenefir asked, and again he stopped pacing.
"This assassin was sent in the guise of the water naga that Devorast befriended in order to secure the Nagaflow end of the canal," Pristoleph explained. "I was meant to believe, or whatever witness was left alive was to believe, that Devorast had turned on me and sent the naga to kill me. Someone is trying to ruin Ivar Devorast, and the canal in the process."
"There is a very long list of people who don't want to see that trench ever filled with water."
"I know," said the ransar, "but it will be. The canal will be finished, and it will be Ivar Devorast who finishes it. Every eye in the wide Realms will be turned in the direction of Innarlith. Ships will pass, and trade will flow."
"And gold," Wenefir whispered.
"And gold," Pristoleph agreed. "And hang every last senator that thinks otherwise. I will raise Ivar Devorast above every one of their thick heads if I have to to see this done."
"And that," Wenefir said, "is why they'll line up to kill you."

3 Uktar, the Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR) The Canal Site

Though he was barely four feet tall, Hrothgar was heavy and stout. His boots could be described the same way, which accounted for all the noise. He had no reason to be quiet, so he reveled in the clomp of his boots on the wooden planks of the scaffold.

The ambient light from torches and lanterns set around the edge of the canal, reflected from the low

overcast, was more than enough light for the dwarf to see by. He ran a hand along the stone blocks as he walked. The scaffold was set up about halfway up the side of the eastern canal wall. Hrothgar had been supervising the cutting of blocks at one of the three quarries that had been established along the length of the canal, so he hadn't been there to make sure the blocks in that section had been properly set. He knew Devorast would have been there, and they wouldn't have been left in place if he didn't like the way they looked, but Hrothgar wanted to check for himself.

He dug at the space between two of the blocks with a fingernail. Leaning in close, he set one cheek to the stone wall, closed the opposite eye, and peered down the length of the mortar line. It was as close to straight as he'd ever seen.

"No way a human set this," he muttered.

He sighed and stepped away, looking all around with a worried smile.

"Nothing to worry about," the dwarf told himself, but he worried nonetheless.

He heard voices echoing from above and was thankful that someone else couldn't sleep. He didn't even bother to wonder why he hadn't heard them before.

It took him a while to get to a ladder that led to a higher scaffold, then another ladder that took him to ground level.

"Who is that, there?" someone called out to him—one of the guards?—but the voice sounded familiar. "Hrothgar?" Devorast said.

The dwarf blinked and shook his head. At first it seemed as though Devorast's voice had come from a rock lying at the edge of the trench. He blinked again and realized that it wasn't a rock, but Devorast's head, his hair matted with mud.

"Careful where you step," Surero said, and Hrothgar was actually startled.

The dwarf looked down and sidestepped carefully away from the alchemist, who, like Devorast, was neck-deep in a hole.

"By Dumathoin's sprinkled rubies, someone finally did it," the dwarf said. "They buried you alive but ye part-way chewed yerselfs out!"

Surero shushed him and Devorast whispered, "Keep your voice down."

Hrothgar stood his ground and folded his arms. "Well?" he said, as quietly as he could without whispering.

"Hand me that keg, there?" Surero asked.

Hrothgar looked around at his feet and noticed a small wooden keg about the size of his head. A length of the burning cord Surero called a "fuse" had been stuck through the top and lay coiled next to the sack.
"I couldn't sleep," the dwarf said, turning to look at Devorast, who had climbed up from the hole he'd been standing in and was walking toward the dwarf with hurried, determined steps. "What are ye two up to here, Ivar? What couldn't ye tell me?"
"Quiet, please, Hrothgar," Devorast urged.
The dwarf stood his ground and glared at the man, who bent and gingerly handed the keg of smokepowder to the alchemist.
"What are you doing with those?" the dwarf asked, though he was starting to understand all on his own. The idea didn't make him happy at all, and part of him hoped Devorast would offer a different explanation, one that didn't mean what Hrothgar knew it had to. "If you put those between the dirt and the stone, they'll collapse the canal when they go off."
"Then here's hoping they never go off," Surero said.
Devorast flashed the alchemist a dark look, then turned to the dwarf and said, "I hope they never will, too, but I had to have some assurance of quality."
"A-what-ance of what, now?" the dwarf demanded, but managed to keep his voice low.
"You know what he means, Hrothgar," Surero said, grunting as he climbed out of the hole. "If you can't sleep, why not help us?"
45_
21 Uktar, the Yearof Rogue Dragons (1373 DR) Fourth Quarter, Innarlith
It's the smell that hits you first, isn't it?" Pristoleph asked.
He looked over at Devorast, who walked alongside him down the narrow, filthy street at the city's easternmost edge. Devorast didn't respond. His eyes darted from the overflowing midden to the walls of the ramshackle houses, but he never met the eyes of the people that stopped to watch them pass.
"For me," Pristoleph went on, "the smell was the easiest thing to forget. Faces, little things like a pile of rotting lumber abandoned for years, or a child's doll floating in raw sewage—those sights have been burned into my memory. I'll never forget that doll."
Pristoleph closed his eyes, but opened them after only a couple steps —on that street, it was a risky proposition to not look where you were going for more than that.
"Someone's mother had stitched it together from rags. It was supposed to be a little girl—a little girl for a little girl, I'd guess. I can see its blue eyes, its red lips, its nose that was actually a button. There was a

stain on the doll's face that made it look like it had some sort of disease of the skin, but all it was was blood, mud, or wine. I suppose that either of the three of those things would constitute a disease for a child's plaything."

Devorast glanced at him, as though he were affected in some way by that image, but what little trace of emotion Pristoleph thought he saw in the Cormyrean's face was gone as quickly as it appeared.

"It's been years—decades, really—and I still wonder about that doll. What happened to the little girl who must have loved it? Did she drop it and not notice? Did she try to retrieve it from the midden before her mother pulled her away? Anything that goes in there doesn't come out in any condition to be hugged ever again."

Devorast smirked, and Pristoleph laughed a little.

"See this building here," the ransar said, pointing to a brick building whose walls had been repaired so many times it looked like the patchwork rag doll of Pristoleph's childhood memory. "This used to be an inn. My mother worked here."

Devorast stopped and looked at the building, and Pristoleph stood behind him. He waited for Devorast to ask for more information or to show any interest in anything he was saying, but he got nothing in response but a mute examination of the falling-down old inn.

"She would take men there," Pristoleph said.

An old man dressed in rags that had to be tied onto him staggered toward Pristoleph. His clothes looked and smelled no different than the midden ditch that ran like a stripe of feces, urine, garbage, and dead rats down the middle of the street. Pristoleph locked his eyes on the beggar's and the man wilted under the ransar's steady, firm gaze. The old man turned on his heel and scurried off into a garbage-strewn alley.

"It was the first building I ever bought," Pristoleph said to Devorast's back. "I've been collecting a pittance in rent on it for years. I'd almost forgotten about it, actually. It's been used for meat packing, a blacksmith that made nails—nails, only, one after another after another all day—and Denier only knows what else, but it's never been an inn. I never let it be that again, and I never will. I'll burn it down myself before another woman sells her body in that building."

"It wasn't the inn," Devorast said, not looking over his shoulder.

Pristoleph found himself nodding but angry at the same time.

"I bought the building next door, too," Pristoleph went on, and started to walk again. "I bought a lot of buildings, and most of the time I didn't ask what was going on inside them. I didn't care. If the rent was paid, they could have been..."

He didn't know what they could have been doing that would have come close to offending him, but that he would have allowed just the

same.
"You haven't asked me why I brought you down here," he said to Devorast. Then he turned on a woman who had inched closer to them, and said, "Easy, there."
The old woman took just a little more convincing than the male beggar before she moved away from the two men.
"You want me to know that you came from nothing," Devorast said. "You thought I should see how far you've come, all the gold you've—"
"No," Pristoleph said, loudly enough so that a couple of the grimy passersby turned and ran from him. "Or yes, I suppose," he went on more quietly, directing the words to Devorast, and Devorast alone. "We've always agreed that coin for coin's sake is hardly worth pursuing."
Devorast nodded.
"I wanted you to know that I have dreams for Innarlith," Pristoleph said. "I really don't come here to remind myself of what it was like growing up on the streets, 'raised,' if you can call it that, by a whore. I didn't ask for your pity, and I never will."
The two men turned to look at each other and stood there longer than either had intended. A little boy tugged on Devorast's sleeve and mumbled something about silver coins. Devorast shook his head but didn't push the boy away.
The little beggar looked up at him, and Pristoleph watched a tear collect in the boy's big eyes. He held out two
silver coins. The boy smiled, grabbed the coins from the ransar's hand, and disappeared back into the dark alley.
"That could have been me," Pristoleph said, gesturing after the boy.
Devorast looked him in the eye and said, "Save for?"
Pristoleph raised an eyebrow and said, "Luck?"
"There is no such thing."
"Ambition?"
"And what's wrong with ambition?" Devorast replied.

4 Nightal, the Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR) The Land of One Hundred and Thirteen
"You have to let me go," Insithryllax said. In his true form, he stood atop the tower and looked down at Marek standing on the dry ground below. "I can't stand it anymore. I have to get out of here."
"I don't know if it's safe," the Thayan said.
Insithryllax tipped his head up to the sky and roared as loudly as he could. The attempt to release his anger fell pitifully short. His body shook, and his wings fluttered. The sound of his roar shook the tower, sending a rain of dust and little chips of the stone blocks to fall around the Red Wizard.

"What is it, Marek?" Insithryllax demanded. He couldn't keep his ebon lips from pulling back to reveal his swordlike fangs. Acid sizzled in the air around him in a fine mist. "Why do I feel so trapped in here? What's happening?"
Marek looked away and Insithryllax roared again. The Red Wizard looked him in the eye, and the dragon could tell that he was reluctant to speak, but he couldn't tell if it was because Marek didn't know the answers to his questions or didn't want to tell him.
"Speak, damn you," the wyrm hissed.
"Something has been happening in the outside world," Marek said. "Something has been happening to the dragons."
"Which dragons?"
Lightning arced from the sky and skittered across the surface of the lake, disturbing the eels.
Marek looked up at the dragon and said, "All of them."
Insithryllax turned his face away from the human and swung his head around on his sinuous neck, searching for some answers in the dead sky of the pocket dimension. There was nothing there.
Nothing.
"You have to get me out of here," Insithryllax said again.
"I can't-"
"Yes, you can!"Insithryllax roared, and Marek took two steps backward, moving his hands up, ready to cast a spell. Insithryllax swallowed and gnashed his fangs, biting back the urge to shower the Thayan with his caustic breath and be done with him—his old friend.
"I was going to say," Marek said in a voice that couldn't possibly be as calm as it sounded, "that I can't guarantee that you won't be effected if you return to Faerun."
"Effected..." the dragon repeated. "It's a Rage, isn't it?"
Marek Rymiit nodded. Insithryllax closed his eyes and tried to steady his breath.
"I could feel it," Insithryllax admitted—and how he hated to say that in front of a human, even Marek. "I could feel it, back in Innarlith, but that was months ago."
Marek said, "I did everything I could, my friend. I've been researching the problem, desperate for a solution, but in your state of mind, I couldn't tell you. I couldn't let you go back there until I knew how to help you. I'm sorry."
Insithryllax looked down on him, studying Marek's face and voice. The lift of an eyebrow, the curl of a lip, one too many blinks in too close succession.
"I'm truly sorry," the Thayan said again.
"It's been months," the dragon said. "No Rage has ever lasted that long."

"This one has," Marek said, and he wasn't lying.
"Let me out," Insithryllax insisted.
Marek half nodded, half shrugged, and said, "You could go mad. You could kill a lot of people."
Insithryllax held the wizard's gaze, looking deep into his eyes, and said, "You can stop me."
They stared at each other for a long time, locked across the distance by their wills.
"Can you take human form?" Marek asked finally.
Insithryllax shifted his weight onto the center of the roof, which creaked and sagged under him. He brought to mind the spell that would make him look human, but the first word stuck in his throat. He shook his head and the word came out, but the second one wouldn't come to him. He growled and spat, dissolving one of the battlements.
Marek Rymiit, from the ground far below, began to cast a spell. The words drifted up on the still air and brought with them the tingle of magic.
Insithryllax felt himself shrinking, and though a big part of him didn't want to trust the human, he managed to hold himself still. After a brief moment, he stood on the roof of the tower, a dark-skinned man in black silks. He looked at his hands and they seemed so alien to him. It was as though he'd never worn that guise before.
Marek appeared then, levitating from the ground below, drifting up until his feet cleared the roof line. He stepped forward to approach Insithryllax. The Thayan kept his hands at his sides, where the dragon could see them.
"Are you sure?" the Red Wizard asked.
Insithryllax nodded.
The spell that sent them back to Faerun was simple—for Marek, at least—and before Insithryllax thought twice about the true consequences of going back, he took a deep breath of Toril's air. He looked around and saw that
they stood in the courtyard of the Thayan Enclave, safely behind the walls in what was, officially speaking, Thayan territory. Marek watched him closely and Insithryllax could tell the wizard was ready to cast a spell—ready to kill him.
"I tire of this," the dragon said, hating the sound of the voice that came from his false body. "And the Rage?" asked Marek.
Insithryllax took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He searched his own feelings and found only exhaustion. He wasn't angry, he wasn't frustrated, he wasn't mad. He was tired.
He looked at Marek and shook his head.
"I'm free," the dragon said, and he couldn't keep it from sounding like

a challenge.
"You always were, my old friend," Marek replied. The Thayan spoke a single word in a forgotten tongue and Insithryllax's human guise fell away. "But I hoped you would stay."
Insithryllax unfurled his wings and stretched his long neck. He'd never wanted so badly to sleep, while at the same time all he could think of was flying—flying free of the beehive urgency of the human city and their petty squabbles.
"Could be," he said to the Thayan, "I'll miss it, in time."
Marek smiled at him and said, "I doubt that."
Insithryllax beat his wings, sending a blast of air at the Thayan, who stepped back and shielded his eyes. Then he was in the air.
A woman on the street screamed when he rose above the walls of the enclave, then a horse panicked and more people screamed and shouted and scurried around. They ran from him never knowing that he didn't care if they lived or died, and at that moment couldn't even be bothered to look down at them, let alone attack them. Though he was tired, he flew fast and high. He closed his eyes for a while and soared past the city walls to the north.
Insithryllax didn't spare the canal even the slightest glance. He turned to the east—to the Surmarsh and home—and was gone from Innarlith forever.
47
18Alturiak, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR) Hungste Province, Shou Lung
I expected them to be suspicious," Pristoleph said, "to be less welcoming."
He looked at Devorast, who quickly drew a series of broad strokes on a parchment folio spread out on the red-enameled wood deck of the strangely-shaped boat. A Shou crewman slipped behind him, bowing as he passed, a vacant smile frozen on his face.
"I still don't understand why you like it here," said the ransar.
Pristoleph put the fine porcelain cup to his lips and reveled in the boiling intensity of the fragrant tea, waiting for Devorast to answer.
"They have ideas," Devorast said, his hand pausing for the briefest moment over the parchment.
"Ideas?"
"I've seen them pack smokepowder into a tube," Devorast said, still not looking up from his drawing, "and attach something like fletching on one end so it looks like an arrow. When they ignite the smokepowder, the arrow flies on its own, but faster than any arrow I've ever seen. They call it a 'hud jidn'."
Pristoleph smiled and nodded. He blinked and looked up into the clear azure sky. The silence that followed was interrupted only by the

gentle, hollow lapping of the river water on the boat's hull. The crewmen were completely silent.
"This boat is interesting, too," Devorast said.
Pristoleph chuckled, and Devorast actually smiled.
"I should get you away from that canal more often," Pristoleph said. "Impossible as it seems, you actually have it in you to relax."
"I'm always relaxed," Devorast replied, and Pristoleph didn't think he was joking.
"I wouldn't have thought you'd be so comfortable with the Shou ways," the ransar said. "I understand they hold to a rigid caste system—one where a man like you might never realize his full potential under the weight of tradition."
"Cormyr is hardly different," Devorast said.
"But Innarlith is?"
Devorast stopped drawing, looked up at Pristoleph, and said, "Innarlith is very different. In Innarlith, a man like you can be king. In Cormyr, you have to be born to it. You can be an infant and still be king if you have the right blood in your veins."
"I'm no king."
Devorast's look made it clear he didn't accept that.
"But you've told me you never want to be ransar," Pristoleph said. "You don't want power over men."
"I don't," Devorast replied, continuing to draw. "I want to build a canal."
"I know, I know," Pristoleph said. "And building it is more important than it being finished."
"No," Devorast said with something that might have been a sigh—but Devorast never sighed. "I fully intend to finish it. You know that."
Pristoleph watched the strange trees pass by on the far riverbank and asked, "Do you know what those trees are called?"
"Bamboo."
"And the river?"
"Chan Lu," Devorast said.
"What does that mean?"
"I don't know."
"How long have we been away?" asked Pristoleph. "Almost three months."
Pristoleph took a deep breath and held it, letting his mind go completely blank. Devorast stopped drawing and the sudden cessation of the charcoal on parchment made Pristoleph exhale and look over at what the man had drawn. Though he was looking at it upside down, Pristoleph could make out the outlines of a tall tower with a peaked roof, not unlike the towers of his own home in Innarlith, but Devorast had drawn in some kind of window or something, a perfect circle near

the top of the tower marked off in twelve even increments. He didn't ask Devorast about the drawing. He'd learned not to.
"I think Marek Rymiit is trying to kill us both," Pristoleph said.
Devorast turned to a blank sheet of parchment and began to draw again.
"I may have made a mistake by being too close to him," Pristoleph admitted. "I've grown too dependent on his magic."
"I don't know Marek Rymiit," Devorast said.
"I don't know whether you'd love him or hate him."
"I'd neither love nor hate him."
With a smile, Pristoleph said, "That's probably the principal reason why he wants to kill you."
Devorast ignored that and continued his drawing. Pristoleph didn't try to interpret the wild but controlled lines and shapes.
"He uses people," Pristoleph said. "I think that's why we worked together so well. I use people, too."
"Are you ashamed of that?"
Pristoleph was too surprised by the question to answer it right away. After a long silence, he simply shrugged.
"You can only use people who allow themselves to be used," Devorast said. "And anyone who would allow that is not worthy of your shame."
Pristoleph laughed even though Devorast was entirely serious.
"This is a strange idea," Devorast asked Pristoleph after a while, "these 'holidays' of yours. How long do they last?"
48_
3Ches, the Yearof Lightning Storms (1374 DR) The Thayan Enclave, Innarlith
"YVˆillem stopped in the doorway to the parlor and looked around. He'd been in that same room many times, but it had been a while, and it looked different. He had the feeling that all the objects, both mundane and exotic, were in the same places, that the furniture and the rugs were the same, that the walls were painted the same color, but still it looked different.
Smaller? he asked himself. It was smaller—darker, duller.
And Marek himself looked awful. Willem winced when the Thayan entered the room. He recoiled ever so slightly from the man's smile. Marek's teeth were brown in spots and yellow everywhere else. Dark circles under his eyes told of many sleepless nights, and he'd gotten fatter. The smell of some tropical flower Willem didn't have a name for followed the wizard into the room, but it didn't mask the old man smell that oozed from the Thayan's very pores.
"Ah," Marek said with a smile that turned Willem's stomach, "there you are, my boy. Come. Sit. You've been too long away from the city."
Willem forced a smile, found a chair, and sat as quickly as he could,

deftly avoiding Marek's embrace.
"So tell me," said the wizard, "how progresses the canal?"
Willem replied, "Well, Master Rymiit."
He wanted to leave it at that, but Marek made it plain
with his pursed lips and wide-open eyes that that wouldn't be nearly sufficient.
"Construction is progressing according to Ivar's plans," Willem said. "It's amazing, really, Master Rymiit."
"What's amazing?" the wizard asked, lifting one eyebrow in a look at once bored and quizzical.
"The whole thing," Willem breathed, certain that answer would never satisfy the Thayan, but it was all Willem could think to say.
Marek chuckled, sat back in his chair, and stared up at the ceiling as though trying to frame his thoughts so that he could express himself in terms simple enough that even a dolt like Willem might understand him.
"Why did you ask me to come here?" Willem said. His voice barely squeaked out of him. His throat had become reluctant to speak, his mind afraid of the words, but his heart longing to know.
"You're still a sitting member of the Senate of Innarlith," Marek said. "You have responsibilities. This is beneath you, really, this digging around—rooting in the dirt out there with the snakes and the nagas."
"I've never been—" Willem started to say, but stopped himself. He didn't want to tell Marek Rymiit that he'd never been happier.
But the Thayan knew what he was going to say and his smile was even more mocking that usual.
"I understand," said the wizard. "Really, I do."
Willem's teeth hurt and he rubbed his bottom lip as he said, "Do you need something from me?"
"Tell me about this man Devorast," Marek said. "Have you brought anything of yourself to this canal? Or do you simply follow the instructions of your former countryman?"
Willem shook his head and said, "We all follow his instructions. To the letter."
Marek shrugged—he'd heard exactly what he'd expected to hear—and he asked, "Is it true what I've heard about Devorast and the ransar?"
"The ransar?"
"Pristoleph has gone off on one of those excursions of his," the wizard explained, "and this time he's brought Ivar Devorast with him."
"And?"
Willem couldn't help but shrink at the look his one-word question elicited from the Thayan. Willem cleared his throat and looked away.
"Is it true?" asked the wizard.
Willem nodded then made himself shrug.

"Then surely he's left you in charge," Marek said.
Willem thought about that for a moment then shook his head. He thought he saw Marek's lips move, and he did something with his hands as though reaching for something in front of him that wasn't there. Willem blinked sweat from his eyes and his face tingled. He shuddered through a sudden chill and wrapped his hands around his arms.
"Are you all right, Willem?" the Thayan asked, and his voice sounded strange—different somehow.
Willem nodded, even though he didn't feel well at all.
"Kurtsson?" Marek called over his shoulder. "Aikiko?"
Willem licked his lips and wondered why his teeth didn't hurt anymore. He puzzled over that so long he didn't notice that two people entered the room and sat together on a small sofa between he and Marek.
"You've been left alone up there," Marek said. "You need help, don't you?"
"Yes," Willem answered without thinking—without being able to think.
"You know Kurtsson."
Willem felt himself nodding and he looked up at Kurtsson. The Vaasan's blue eyes were cold, his smile condescending.
"And this is Aikiko. Have you met Aikiko?"
Willem's head got stuck between a nod and a shake. He didn't remember the woman, but for a moment he was
distracted by the look of her thin, perpetually squinting eyes and the exotic cast to her skin. Her waist-length hair was as black as a drow's flesh, and her smile was as condescending as the Vaasan's.
"The two of them are going to go back with you," Marek said with a grin.
"We're to help you," Kurtsson said.
"Don't worry about a thing," said Aikiko.
Willem shook his head, though the movement hurt his neck.
"Surely," Marek said, his voice taking on a coldness that made Willem's skin crawl, "you can use the help—with Devorast gone."
"He-" Willem started.
"He may never come back," Marek said and Willem couldn't resist looking the Thayan in the eyes.
"But Ivar..." Willem started again. "Ivar will..."
"We'll help you," said the strange-looking woman who might have been a half-elf. "We're only trying to help."
"Agree to the arrangement, Willem," Marek said.
Willem started to nod and tried to stop himself. He caught a glimpse of a self-satisfied grin from Kurtsson that made him say, "I don't think

I can..."
But by the time he got that far he was nodding.
"You'll let us help you?" Aikiko said.
And Willem nodded.
"Help me," he whispered.
5Q_
14 Tarsakh, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR) The Canal Site
fristoleph looked at Devorast then at the—whatever it was—then back to Devorast. He didn't know which sight he found more unsettling.
"What is it?" Devorast said.
Pristoleph had never heard that quality in his voice before—even more clipped, even colder. He looked down at the muddy ground. Bubbles sizzled and popped around the edges of his boots and little tendrils of steam rose into the warm air. The ransar flexed his right hand into a fist and covered it with his left. If he'd touched anyone at that moment the heat from his palm would have raised a blister.
"Answer him," Pristoleph commanded no one in particular. "Someone speak."
"Her name is Senator Aikiko," the alchemist Surero answered. "But it was the Vaasan that's been overseeing it—every part of it."
Pristoleph didn't look at the alchemist but at Devorast.
"Take it down," Devorast said.
All eyes turned to the stone archway. It rose over the canal trench, which ended only a few yards beyond it.
"Take it down," Devorast repeated, and the workers that had gathered to see his reaction to the arch began to break up and go on about the business of carrying out Devorast's orders.
The alchemist and the dwarf glanced at each other, but otherwise didn't move.
"Senator Aikiko?" Pristoleph asked the both of them. "She has no authority here."
Surero and Hrothgar stared at him as though he were lying, but the fire in his eyes made them quickly look away.
"She's a senator," the alchemist said, addressing Devorast.
"What of it?" Pristoleph demanded.
He stepped forward, advancing on the alchemist, who took one step backward away from him and looked at Devorast to help him. Pristoleph grabbed Surero by the throat and felt the man's skin crisp under his grip. The dwarf stepped back and squared his shoulders with defiance at the same time.
"What," Pristoleph sneered into the terrified alchemist's face, "of it?"
"Pristoleph," Devorast said. He put a hand on his shoulder, but pulled it away quickly when the genasi's heat burned him. "Let him go."
"You heard 'im," Hrothgar said. "You let the man go. Ransar or no...

you bloody well let 'im go."
Pristoleph heard the black firedrakes step up behind him when the dwarf moved closer. The alchemist gasped and Pristoleph released him. Surero fell to the ground in a heap, gingerly touching at the fiery red burn on his neck. The smell of it spiked the air around them.
"Speak," the ransar ordered. "Speak, the both of you, or I'll burn you where you stand."
"It's a portal," Surero said, then he stopped to cough and wince in pain.
Pristoleph laughed even though he wasn't the slightest bit amused. He turned back to the arch and looked up at it. Though it was impressive for its sheer size, there was something about it that felt alien, wrong. Runes had been chiseled into the stones and inlaid with precious metals. Rising above the simple elegance of the straight-cut canal walls it appeared garish.
"You were gone," the dwarf said.
Pristoleph turned and the dwarf held his gaze, as stern and intractable as the stone he cut.
"I shouldn't have been away so long," Devorast said, but the disappointment in his eyes was plain.
The dwarf blushed and that stonelike visage slipped the slightest bit.
"We've been gone a few months," Pristoleph said. "Does he have to be here every day? Does he have to hold your hands? Does he have to cut every stone, and dig every hole?"
Devorast shook his head and the anger came back to the dwarf's face.
"A few months, eh?" Hrothgar grumbled. "A few months?"
"A few months!" the ransar shouted.
The dwarf stepped forward with clenched fists and so did the two black firedrakes at Pristoleph's sides.
"You've had 'im away for five an' a half months," Hrothgar said. "Five an' a half months."
"I will be away or I will be here for as long as I wish, dwarf," the ransar said. "And in the meantime, my orders will be carried out, and they will be carried out without question."
"And what were your orders, Ransar?" Surero asked. He looked up from where he sat on the wet, matted grass, and held a shaking hand a few inches from his neck.
"My orders?" Pristoleph replied. "My orders came to you through Ivar Devorast."
Surero glanced at Devorast but obviously saw nothing there in which he could find solace. He looked back down at the ground and grimaced.
"These senators of yours," Hrothgar said. "The moment you were gone, they started comin' outta the stonework. I'm happy to tell them where

to get off, but the crew, they see a senator and it gets 'em all tense an' twitchy."
"But Aikiko?" Pristoleph shot back. "What in the name of Azuth's flaming manhood could she possibly have to contribute to this?"
"Nothing," said the dwarf. "She's a mouth-breather if ever one walked under this godsbedamned sun o' yers. But that Kurtsson—the wizard—I think he ensorcelled enough o' the men that the others went along just to make it easy on 'em."
"We did our best, Ivar," Surero almost sobbed from where he sat on the ground. "We couldn't stop them."
Something in the sound of the alchemist's voice cooled Pristoleph. He took a deep breath and the ground under his feet no longer boiled.
"Kurtsson," Pristoleph said. "I know him."
"He works for the Thayan," Surero said.
Pristoleph resisted the urge to look back at the black
firedrakes that still flanked him. He couldn't explain why, but the guards made him uneasy just then. "Rymiit," Pristoleph said.
The Thayan had always been opposed to the canal—he'd always argued against it. His enclave, which had taken complete control of the trade in magic in every corner of Innarlith, would have profited from the continued practice of moving ships and goods to the Vilhon Reach by magical means—even after the Everwind disaster. But Rymiit had been an ally of Pristoleph's—had been instrumental in his seizing the mantle of ransar.
He turned to Devorast, who still stared at the arch, and said, "These two were loyal to you, at least." He paused to sigh. "Loyal...."
"We were gone too long," Devorast said. "Hrothgar and Surero are right."
Pristoleph shook his head and wanted to argue, but he couldn't.
"I still don't understand..." the ransar said. "Aikiko? What did she do? Did she climb into a carriage, make the trip all the way up here, step out, and just seize control? That simpleton?"
Surero shook his head and looked at Devorast then the ground. It was obvious he was reluctant to speak.
"Hells," the dwarf grumbled, "if she'd done that, I'd've knocked 'er out myself."
Pristoleph stared at he dwarf, waiting for more, but the stonecutter looked at Devorast as though waiting for permission to continue.
"Don't tell me Rymiit himself—" the ransar started.
"No," Devorast interrupted. "It wasn't Marek Rymiit."
Pristoleph turned and was confronted by Devorast's back. Devorast stared at the gate, and the ransar waited while the man turned to look back down the length of the canal, which was so long it disappeared over the southern horizon. The blue sky hung dense and humid, quiet

save for the distant sounds of work gangs.
Ivar Devorast took a deep breath and said, "It was Willem."
51_^_
16 Tarsakh, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR) The Canal Site
Willem hadn't moved the tent, as had become customary, to the end of the great trench. He couldn't see the portal arch from the tent, and the sound of the bursting smokepowder was subdued enough by the distance that he didn't jump out of his skin every time one went off. And he was far away from the men who looked at him with accusatory glares and grumbled behind his back.
He sat at the drawing table and stared down at one of Ivar Devorast's drawings, a plan for a section of the canal that would never be built. Overwhelmed by a draining melancholy, all he could do was stare at it. He was thirsty but couldn't face the complex and draining task of pouring a glass of water from a pitcher that was just out of reach on another table. When the tent flap rustled and someone stepped in, Willem didn't turn around.
"You had to know I was coming back," Ivar Devorast said.
Willem's shoulders sagged and a pressure pushed on his chest so that he could barely force his lungs to take in air. The tip of his tongue cracked, his mouth was so dry, and he tasted blood. The incessant pain of his teeth flared and he closed his eyes to fight back a tear.
"Willem," Devorast said.
Willem opened his mouth—but not to speak. He couldn't breathe.
"I should have given you some way to contact me," Devorast said, stepping closer.
Willem managed to say, "I would have... used it." "Why, Willem?" Devorast asked.
Willem shook his head and gasped in a breath that seemed to lodge in his throat. A stabbing pain struck his knee and his shoulders pressed down even farther. He felt as though he were being crushed into the damp ground.
"I couldn't stop them," Willem said. His voice was so low, so weak, he could hardly hear it himself. "He compelled—"
Willem's throat closed and he gagged. He wanted to tell Devorast everything. He wanted to tell him that Marek Rymiit had in some way magically compelled him to accept Aikiko and Kurtsson's "help" in finishing the canal. He wanted to tell Devorast he had no choice, that he was just a pawn, as always, of more powerful men, but he couldn't. He couldn't force the words from his mouth.
"Did you come here to kill me?" Willem whispered.
Devorast stepped closer and Willem tensed, certain he would feel a blade pierce the flesh of his quivering back and still his heart. He couldn't decide if that would be such a bad thing at all. His heart beat

too fast, and a dull pain spread through his chest like water spilled from a barrel.
"It was my fault," Devorast said.
Willem shook his head.
"It was," Devorast. went on. "I was gone too long." "You..." Willem choked out, "should not have... trusted me."
"I shouldn't have trusted anyone. I should have understood that I have too many enemies to leave for five months or more."
Willem nodded, and though he couldn't remember breathing in, he managed to rasp, "You should have been able to trust me."
Willem waited for Devorast to answer, but there was only silence in the tent behind him. A sharp pain in his head made him close his eyes.
"Ivar?" Willem whispered. "You can't forgive me."
Willem's jaw clenched of its own accord and the agony of his teeth grinding together made him tilt off the stool to sprawl on the floor. He was dimly aware of Devorast
stepping forward to help him, then stepping away when he spun into a crouch, his hands in front of him, his fingers bent to claw at the air.
"Willem," Devorast said. "You're not well."
Willem's head exploded in a shower of liquid agony and the skin on his face tightened, stretching his dry lips into a cracking, painful grimace.
"Pity?" Willem choked out.
He looked up, and with dim, dull vision, saw Devorast's smug, vile, hated face looking at him with condescending pity—looking at him as though Willem were a troubled child who'd done wrong, but couldn't be blamed because he didn't know any better.
Willem rose to his feet, and as he did the pain dropped away, like a tree sheds it leaves in the autumn. By the time he stood to his full height, he was rid of it all, the pain, the shame, the guilt—all of it. And it had been replaced by a single thought, a singular, burning desire.
From a tiny, walled-off portion of his conscious mind Willem knew he wasn't breathing, and could feel that his heart had stopped in his chest. But that was just the smallest part of him, a part too small to stop the rest, and the rest wanted only to kill—to kill Ivar Devorast.
Willem lurched forward, both hands up to grasp Devorast's throat, but the man turned to the side just in time and Willem, overbalanced, staggered past him.
"Willem," Devorast said. "Stop it."
With a feral growl Willem spun and lashed out with a backhand that caught Devorast on the shoulder. It was a weak blow, but it sent Devorast, arms flailing, into the drawing table. Wood cracked and splintered and parchment tore and crumpled as Devorast crashed to

the ground.
Willem bent at the waist and twisted, which made something inside him crack and tear, and he grabbed Devorast by his threadbare black vest. Ignoring the sounds of his own body creaking, only half aware of his own pain, Willem lifted Devorast off the ground.
Devorast hit his wrists then tried to dig his fingernails into Willem's forearms, but Willem ignored the sensation that a living human might describe as "pain." He threw Devorast to the ground. When he hit, the air went out of his lungs in a loud grunt that Willem found at once satisfying and disturbing.
He didn't want to kill Ivar Devorast. He had to. He didn't want it to be a long, protracted, painful death, but it would be.
Devorast crawled away from him as Willem lurched forward.
"Willem," Devorast gasped, "what's... happened to you?"
Though Willem wanted to answer, he couldn't. He didn't know what had happened to him, and he didn't want Devorast to know anyway.
"Die," Willem barked out—his voice so shredded and guttural the word was hardly recognizable.
Devorast staggered to his feet and turned to run out of the tent, but Willem lashed at him with his left fist-pulling the punch at just the last instant—and knocked Devorast once more to the ground. He knew that if he'd hit him as hard as he could he would have killed him, and as he tried to understand why he'd spared the life of the man he was absolutely compelled to kill, the last trace of question, the last morsel of will, fled him.
He screamed out his rage—blind, remorseless, unfettered—at the writhing form of his victim, and he stepped forward.
The tent opened and someone stood in front of Willem.
"Surero—no!" Devorast gasped.
Willem didn't recognize the intruder. He saw a face-eyes wide, mouth open—and a body, but that was all. It wasn't a person, not a man with a soul and a history, but a thing between Willem and Devorast, and he couldn't have anything between him and Devorast.
Willem lashed out, and there was no last-instant tempering of the blow, no reprieve for the unknown victim
that should have known better than to step between him and his kill.
Surero's head exploded from the force of Willem's blow. The dry-skinned fist shattered teeth, drove the alchemist's mouth open, and continued on through flesh, bone, brain, and sinew to burst out the other side drenched in blood and saliva.
"No!" Devorast shouted. "Willem!"
Willem stumbled backward, avoiding the headless corpse and blinking from the spray of blood driven up from the alchemist's still-beating heart.

The alchemist.
Willem grunted and blinked—he'd killed... who? Surero.
And that little closed off corner of his consciousness opened just enough, just barely enough, for him to realize what he'd done. That little corner spoke then to the rest of his dead mind and he knew on every level still available to him that he'd killed the wrong man.
Willem took control of his body for one step, then another, and he was out of the tent and running.
52_
17 Tarsakh, the Year of Lightning Sorms (1374 DR) The Canal Site
Iristoleph stood when Devorast opened his eyes. His heart raced and he almost choked on a sip of the cheap local wine he'd found in the tent.
"Surero..." Devorast said, his voice thin and raspy.
Pristoleph shook his head and Devorast closed his eyes. The genasi stood there, looking away, for a long moment while his friend relived the alchemist's death. Pristoleph had to know more.
"What was it that killed him?" he asked. "What was it that infected you?"
"Infected...?"
"You were half dead when a work gang got to the tent," Pristoleph explained. "Surero had been murdered, and you lay dying from some kind of disease. It was as though you were rotting alive, just... deteriorating."
Devorast shook his head and closed his eyes.
"The men said they saw someone run from the tent," Pristoleph continued. "They described some kind of cloying smell, but didn't see the man."
"It was Willem."
Pristoleph hissed with surprise. His eyes narrowed and he looked around the room as though searching for something, but he didn't know what he was looking for.
"How could that be?" asked Pristoleph. "The priestess from the Sisterhood of Pastorals said it was a disease associated with—"
"It was Willem," Devorast interrupted. He struggled to sit up, but Pristoleph held out a calming hand and he lay back down on the narrow, sweat-soaked cot.
"I'm beginning to understand something," Pristoleph said, and waited for Devorast to look at him before he went on. "I saw something at the Thayan Enclave once, some kind of undead creature. Marek Rymiit made it, but he said it was for him, that itwasn't for sale. It wasn't a zombie, like the dockworkers, but... something else. I don't know what."
Devorast closed his eyes and looked away.

"I think," Pristoleph whispered, "that everything I feared has come to pass."
53_
18 Tarsakh, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR) The Nagawater
When Svayyah's right hand broke the surface of the water, she turned it palm up. From below, Devorast's rough
but fascinating features appeared blurred and shifting, and even with eyes accustomed to seeking prey from the safety of the river, she couldn't quite tell if the human was happy or sad. The fact that he'd come to the Nagawater, to the place they had agreed on as a rendezvous point, didn't bode well, though. Ivar Devorast didn't generally visit her with good news. Unless...
He took her hand and Svayyah suppressed a thrilled shudder. Though the man was surely senthissa'ssa—a teacher worthy of emulating—he was human, a lesser being, nonetheless.
Devorast slipped into the water and shivered. When Svayyah finished her spell she touched his cheek. His eyes and the set of his jaw showed the same reluctance he'd always had with the effects of the spell, he opened his mouth, and cautiously at first, drew in a breath of the frigid water. His body lurched and he coughed out a stream of bubbles, which made Svayyah smile. His second breath was better received by lungs that had finally been purged of air. She looked him in the eye and he remained still while she cast a second spell—one that would allow him to speak.
With the air out of his lungs, he was at least a bit less buoyant. When she took him by the hand and whipped her great serpentine body behind her, she had only to expend a bit more effort than normal to carry him down with her to the murky river bottom.
Neither of them spoke as she continued to carry him along, kicking up sediment behind her and scattering the green and brown fish in front of her. A giant frog kicked up a cloud of black mud, startled by the naga's approach, and spared her a frightened glance as it swam at speed to avoid her. Svayyah looked around and remembered a sunken log and a collection of rocks that formed the shape of an arrow. She would come back later, when she was at leisure, to devour the frog.
They soon came to a submerged burrow, one of many that Svayyah had dug over her long lifetime. It was a convenient place to withdraw from the occasional dangers of the wild Nagawater. A place to sleep, eat, or plan. The entrance was barely big enough for her alone, so she pushed Devorast toward it:
When he looked at her with suspicion she said, "Come now, Senthissa'ssa. You wish to speak in private."
Though he hadn't said as much, Svayyah found it a safe assumption, and one that was apparently correct, for Devorast turned and swam in

his ungainly human fashion, into the dark hole. The moment he cleared the passage, Svayyah followed.
Past the opening, the burrow was a roughly spherical depression in the muddy riverbank, entirely filled with water. Roots from trees along the bank held the walls together. Devorast felt around along the walls, facing away from her, and Svayyah realized he couldn't see. She dug one hand into the mud wall and found a small gold box. She'd secreted one such box in each of her burrows, and in them were coins and other items of value. She opened the box with a sibilant, hissing sound to deactivate the magical traps that sealed it.
Inside the box was a silver coin minted millennia past by a forgotten civilization. A spell had been cast on it that made it glow with a brilliance that made both Svayyah and Devorast blink. Their eyes adjusted soon enough and they faced each other in the tight confines of the burrow. Svayyah's serpent's body brushed up against the side of Devorast's leg, but the man didn't seem to mind the contact.
"It is safe to speak here," she said,,then raised an eyebrow and waited.
Devorast appeared reluctant to speak, but finally he said, "I came here to tell you that the construction of the canal will be delayed indefinitely."
Svayyah was surprised, and let that show. "That's not what we expected to hear, Senthissa'ssa,"she said.
Before she could go on, Devorast said, "Please, do not call me that."
"It is meant to show respect," Svayyah said. She tried not to be too irritated. After all, as wise and as capable as he seemed to be, Devorast was a human after all. "It means—"
"I know what it means," Devorast interrupted, and he either didn't notice the stern look of reproach she flashed him, or didn't care. Svayyah would have wagered the contents of her little gold box that the latter was true. "Please, call me Ivar."
"Ivar," she said with a tilt of her head. It wasn't an unpleasant sound. "What has happened now? More false nagas sent to kill or confuse you?"
Devorast shook his head. 1
"Your ransar has been unseated?" she ventured. "Or he has withdrawn his support and coin?" t
"None of those things, no," he said. "It was me."
She thought about that word, "me," as he looked away, looked around the burrow without really seeing it. It was a strange concept, the humans had, of considering themselves an individual among many, instead of one of many individuals. Svayyah wondered if they could even understand the distinction.
"I allowed myself to be distracted," Devorast went on.
"It is a common trait among humans," she said, still waiting for a

clearer explanation.
Devorast shrugged her comment off and said, "Do you have anything in that box that can help me send a message?"
Svayyah said, "No, but there are other boxes." She thought for a moment then asked, "What has happened?"
"I allowed an enemy in too close, and so did Pristoleph. Even he won't be able to stop him now."
"Explain," Svayyah said, curious about the vagaries of human interaction.
"The Red Wizard I've told you about," he said, "sent agents to install a portal in the canal. He's done something to Willem Korvan, something that made him some kind of monster."
"You've known for some time that the Thayan would be just as happy to see you dead," Svayyah said. "You've told us yourself that this one means to take the canal from you, or destroy it. If he's kept you alive this long, it means he intends to shame you in the process."
Devorast nodded.
"So what has changed?" she asked. "He'll kill Pristoleph, too," Devorast said. "When that happens, I'll only have Hrothgar, and some of the men." "The alchemist?"
"Killed by Willem Korvan," Devorast said, and at that moment Svayyah saw more emotion on the man's face than she'd ever imagined from him. "That was my fault, too."
"It sounds like it was Willem Korvan's fault," she said. "But that aside. You gave us the impression that Pristoleph was stronger than the Thayan, that together the two of you could—"
"Marek Rymiit controls the senate," Devorast said. "And it's the senate that names the ransar. Whoever is named ransar controls the black firedrakes."
"The ransar's guards?"
"If they strip Pristoleph of his title he'll find himself surrounded by acid-spitting monsters that can hide in human form."
Svayyah stopped to consider that, but could find no other conclusion than the one Devorast had come to.
"Then it's over?" she asked.
Devorast didn't reply, and didn't look at her.
"Ah, well," the water naga said, "we were never convinced it was such a good idea after all, all those human ships passing over us—tolls or no tolls."
54
19 Tarsakh, the Yearof Lightning Storms (1374 DR) Second Quarter, Innarlith
Home.
The word itself had lost all meaning to him, but it was both more and

less than a word that brought Willem Korvan to his own door. After fleeing the canal, fighting all the while against a compulsion to return-to return and kill Ivar Devorast—Willem wandered south. His dead, numb legs carried him along ground that grew increasingly familiar, even to senses ravaged by undeath.

He entered the city under the cloak of night, crawling in along the edge of where the wall met the rocky shoreline of the Lake of Steam. He thought he might have killed a guard, or even a whole contingent of them, and maybe even more people as he wound his way through the streets of the First Quarter. He couldn't remember for sure. Perhaps there had been no people at all. He thought he could still hear a woman's primal, ragged scream echoing in his ears, but it might have been his imagination—or his inner ears drying and crumbling in his head.

Something that could have been described as memory moved him through the city. There were people in the First Quarter, talking and singing in taverns and fest-halls along the quay and a few blocks deeper in. But when he crossed that invisible but very real line into the Second Quarter, the city went quiet. Candle- and hearth-light burned in windows high above the streets, but not many. Most windows were dark, the residents asleep, or pretending to be so the neighbors, who were themselves pretending to be asleep, wouldn't notice and begin whispering rumors of—

Of what?

Willem had forgotten what he was thinking. He didn't understand himself.

The buildings may as well have been solid to him, boulders or stone towers carved out by wind and water. The streets were as a canyon. The idea that there was anyone inside those structures made no difference to Willem.

There was in fact no reason for Willem to go home. It wasn't a matter of his will or his master's. It was as though his body walked there entirely of its own accord, and for reasons it kept to itself.

The garden gate was never meant to be anything but ornamental, and Willem didn't even think of it until his knee clipped it and the latch broke free to clatter onto the flagstone pathway. He didn't worry that the sound would alert anyone, because it didn't matter.

Though he still had a key in his pocket, when he got to the door and found it locked, he pushed against it, broke that latch, too, and stepped inside.

He looked around at his own foyer and was staggered by a sense of familiarity, but he couldn't put a name to any of the objects there. He had no recollection of where he'd found the little silver things or the ceramic things, or the flat representations of things that hung on the

walls.
He stepped in, tracking in mud and horse manure from the streets. He smelled it, but it didn't matter.
A noise from upstairs drew his eyes to the ceiling. He took a step into the house then dragged his other foot behind it, and the door slammed closed. The sound didn't startle him. He took a few more steps into the house, moving for the parlor. He stopped at the foot of the stairs when he head more sounds—someone moving around— from above.
"Willem?" a familiar voice called.
Willem looked up the stairs. It was a woman. Someone he knew.
"Willem, my dear," the voice came back. "Is that you?"
He opened his mouth to respond but had lost, at least for the nonce, the ability to speak. It was something that came and went. What issued from his throat was a dry rattle.
"Willem?" the woman repeated.
Willem could feel the fear in her voice, could smell it in her even from up the stairs. He staggered another step to the bottom of the stairs and waited.
She took two steps down and called his name again. She paused, waiting for an answer, and when she got none she stepped down one more. Willem could see her foot, bare and at the end of a fat, stumplike ankle. Candlelight flickered on the steps.
"I have a dagger," she said, her voice quaking, "and I know how to use it."
Willem stepped back, clearing the foot of the stairs, and watched the feet take two more steps down. She bent to look at him, perhaps seeing his shadow, perhaps merely sensing his presence at the bottom of the stairs. He saw the silver candlestick in her hand.
She had to take one more step down to see him, and just as she lifted her foot, Willem lunged.
Her grabbed the thick, fleshy ankle and pulled. Though she was heavy, Willem was strong, and the woman's feet flew out from under her. She hit the stairs hard on her back and her nightgown flipped up to cover her face as she tumbled down the steps like an overstuffed sack of flour.
Something made Willem step back and he started when his back touched a wall.
Squealing like the terrified pig she was, the woman squirmed about on the floor, pulled her nightclothes from her face, and sat up, the candlestick still in her hand. The candle had fallen out and extinguished itself in its own tumble down the stairs. She held the candlestick in front of her like a weapon to ward him off. She had no dagger, but Willem had known that was a lie the moment she'd said it.
Their eyes met. The woman screamed in horror. Willem recognized

her and a word came to him: Mother.
She rolled on the floor, trying to get away from him when he bent toward her. He tried to speak to her, but couldn't. She screamed and screamed and the sound rattled in Willem's ears, then echoed in his head. He didn't like the sound. The sound was bad, and he wanted it to stop.
Willem grabbed his mother by the back of her head, his fingers twisting her hair. He pulled her head up and mouthed the word "Mother," but she couldn't see his lips. She screamed even louder, so loudly that Willem had to close his eyes, though that didn't actually do anything to make the noise stop. He smashed her face against the floor and the scream was momentarily combined with a wet crack, then she quieted to a moaning, sickly sound that made Willem's dead flesh crawl, so he smashed her face down again.
Her body convulsed and her legs kicked out. He drove her face once more into the ever-increasing puddle of hot, sticky blood and broken teeth. She kicked one more time then was still.
He let go of her head and stepped back. His right knee gave out and he fell, then scrambled back on his hands, fetching up against the door.
He opened his mouth to scream, but when he did his eyes fell on the corpse of his mother and he heard the sound of her blood, dripping at first then pouring over the lip of the single step that led into the parlor.
A barely-audible rattle escaped his wide-opened mouth.
He climbed to his feet, using the wall to steady him, and burst out the front door. The street outside was quiet, and he soon found the cold embrace of a dark alley. There he clawed at the brick wall and tried to think about what he'd just done. He tried to weep, but quickly forgot why, and instead just clamped his teeth shut and shook his head.
There's another, he thought. There was a better one.
A better—what? He didn't know. He staggered away, not even conscious that his lips mouthed the name "Halina."
55_
19 Tarsakh, the Yearof Lightning Storms (1374 DR) Pristal Towers, Innarlith
Had Wenefir not thought to cast a spell to protect him from the ravages of heat and fire, he likely would have been dead after his first few breaths in Pristoleph's private chamber. The braziers had all been piled high with wood, and torches blazed so bright and hot on sconces all along the walls that the already black stone behind them was beginning to melt.
And in the center of that furnace stood Pristoleph, his strange red hair replaced by a crown of dancing, sizzling flame. His eyes blazed yellow

and smoke began to billow from his robes.
"Ransar," Wenefir called, feeling he had to shout over the roar of the flames. "Pristoleph—how long have you been in here?"
Pristoleph looked at him and shook his head, making the flames on his scalp quiver.
Wenefir swallowed and looked away, terrified by the genasi's fiery gaze.
"Ransar," he said. "Please. Let me help you. What is it you require?"
"What is it I require?" the ransar shot back, and though he didn't want to look, Wenefir thought flames shot from his mouth and smoke puffed from his nostrils. "What is it I require?"
The heat grew so intense that even Wenefir's Cyric-granted spells began to fail him.
"Please, Pristoleph," he said. "You'll burn the place down. For the Mad God's sake, please."
Pristoleph took a deep breath and the flames died down a little—as if he'd drawn them into his lungs.
"Better," Wenefir said, risking a smile. "Thank you."
"I don't suppose you can explain what happened while I was away," the ransar said, his eyes losing some of their fire but none of their intensity.
Wenefir swallowed again and said, "You left Willem Korvan in charge. I—"
"I left no one in charge, Seneschal," Pristoleph interrupted. "Devorast trusted Korvan. That was his mistake. I trusted the Thayan, and that was mine. Tell me, Wenefir, my oldest friend, which was the greater mistake?"
"Perhaps neither," Wenefir chanced.
A spark of yellow darted through Pristoleph's eyes when he said, "The nerve of them."
"It was a risk on their part, indeed," Wenefir concurred. "But perhaps there was no real effort to undermine your authority."
"Undermining Devorast undermines me," said the ransar.
"As you have said, Ransar, but consider this," Wenefir said. "Korvan, Kurtsson, and Aikiko were trying to help. Perhaps there was a difference of... vision, but—"
"Damn it, Wenefir!" Pristoleph shouted, and all of the fires burst hotter and bigger to punctuate it before moderating once more. "There can be only one vision."
Not fully understanding, Wenefir replied, "But surely you agree that Devorast could never have finished something so great on his own."
Shaking his head, Pristoleph said, "Something so great can only be done by one man alone."
Wenefir, his eyes narrow and his brow furrowed, shook his head.

"You don't understand, do you?" the ransar asked.
Wenefir replied, "Not entirely, no, but I think I understand you, Pristoleph. After all this time, who but me could?"
"And?"
"And I hope that you will see that no harm was done to you while you were away."
Pristoleph looked deep into Wenefir's eyes, and the Cyricist's knees shook.
"I have your loyalty, still, after all this time?" asked Pristoleph.
"You do," Wenefir said, and it wasn't entirely a lie.
"Then do this," Pristoleph commanded, the fires rising when he squared his broad shoulders. "Send for the wemics, and have them place the Vaasan wizard Kurtsson, Senators Korvan and Aikiko, and the Thayan Marek Rymiit under arrest."
"Under arrest?" Wenefir asked, stalling. Despite the dangerous heat in the chamber, the priest's blood ran cold. "On what charge?"
"For Willem Korvan, the charge is murder," Pristoleph said, and Wenefir almost gasped at the look of grief that came over his old friend. "He murdered the alchemist Surero in clear view of at least one witness. Beware, though, he is no longer human, but some sort of diseased undead."
"And the others?"
"Treason."
"But the Thayan-"
"What of him?" Pristoleph asked through clenched teeth. The fire on the top of his head blazed hot yellow and Wenefir had to blink and turn his face away.
"He is not, technically ... legally speaking, one of your subjects, Ransar," Wenefir explained. "He stands on Thayan soil when he is in his enclave, and I surely doubt that he'll leave there until you—" he paused and swallowed once more—"forgive me, Ransar... cool down."
"Thayan soil__" Pristoleph sneered.
"Perhaps an investigation first," Wenefir suggested, hoping to stall the ransar in any way possible. "If we have the proper evidence, an appeal can be made to the Thayan
authorities. After all, Marek Rymiit is not without superiors of his own."
"An investigation ..." Pristoleph growled. He seemed to be biting his tongue. "Very well. But Willem Korvan is a murderer, and he became a citizen of the city-state of Innarlith when he became a senator. Find him and destroy him."
Wenefir, caring not the slightest bit for the fate of Willem Korvan, bowed and got out of that room as fast as he could.

20 Tarsakh, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR) The Sisterhood of Pastorals, Innarlith

The wall was high, but not impossible to climb. Willem looked up and saw the glow of the broken glass that had been mortared to the top of it, reflecting the wan light of the coming dawn. He dug his fingernails —talons, really, that had grown an inch in one night—into the space between the smooth rocks. Moving slowly but with purpose, he scaled the wall. When the broken glass tore his trousers and bit into his legs, he didn't care, and he didn't bleed.

Willem dropped to the mud between two shrubs and kneeled in the darkness of the wall's shadow. He moved his head from side to side, and though he didn't actually draw any air into his lungs—he no longer needed to do that—he was sure of the smell of her.

The name came to him once more—Halina—but it faded as quickly as it came, and there was only his quarry, his prey. There was only a goal he didn't understand.

He crossed the manicured grounds, his chin up, his nose trolling the air for the scent. He found it again, and it was as though a finger formed in the air to point him in the right direction.

He followed the scent to a shorter stone wall, one more ornamental than the high wall that surrounded the place.

Willem didn't know exactly where he was. He was on the grounds of some kind of building, and there was something about that building, about the ground itself, that repelled him as much as the scent attracted him.

He stepped over the little wall and found himself in a graveyard.

Maybe three dozen stones had been scattered, seemingly at random, on the cut grass. None more than three feet tall, they were simple and carved with names.

Willem sniffed the air again and stepped between the stones.

The sound of a voice drifted from far away, carried on the cool pre-dawn air. Willem looked in the direction he thought the voice had come from, but he saw nothing. Looking into the shadows he felt a sense of impending doom wash over him, so strong he almost fell to his knees.

He shook his head when the scent intruded on him—if it even was a scent. It could have been more an impulse—a need to find her.

Whatever the mechanism, Willem knew she was close, and he was certain that when he found her, she would make everything all right. She would save him. He didn't know her name or how they knew each other. He could form no picture of her in his reeling, increasingly dull mind. But he knew her, and he knew she was—

There.

Under the ground, buried.

He let a ragged growl tremble unvoiced in his throat, and he fell to his knees in front of a stone. His fingers found the engraving and traced the letters. He blinked but couldn't see them, and though he wasn't conscious of being able to read, he knew the letters came together to spell her name.

Halina.

"Who is that there?" a woman called out to him.

He jumped to his feet, his head spinning, and cast about for the source of the voice.

Though so much of what was left of him longed for it to be her, he knew it wasn't Halina.

"By the Blessed—" the woman shrieked.

He saw her step out from behind a tree, just inside the low wall around the cemetery. She clutched at her chest. The light from her lantern lit her face from below, twisting her features into a grotesque mockery of human.

Willem, overwhelmed by the need to kill the woman, moved toward her, his hands poised to rip her head from her shoulders. The woman raised the thing she'd clutched at her neck for and a brilliant white light overwhelmed Willem's vision.

He couldn't see any details of the symbol, but he knew what it was. The power of a goddess he was unfit to name rolled over him like a thunderhead rolls across an open plain.

He turned and ran. His legs moved, and his arms bounced at his sides. He couldn't think. The need to find Halina was gone, the overwhelming necessity to kill Ivar Devorast also fled, and all that was left was the immediate, irrepressible need just to get away.

The woman drove him before her, and he ran all the way to the high wall. He climbed it faster than before, cut himself more deeply, too, but once he was over he ran and ran and ran into the growing light of the awakening city.

By the time he found an abandoned shed behind a ramshackle storefront in which to hide, there was nothing left of Willem Korvan. The man had been erased, and the monster knew only one thing.

Kill.

Kill Ivar Devorast.

57

20Tarsakh, the Year ofLightning Storms (1374 DR) Berrywilde

f*hyrea heard someone call her name. In the dark, still expanse of the country estate, she had heard her name come from nowhere before, had for years spoken with apparitions of violet light, but the voice that came to her that night was different.

She lay in a tub of warm water that she'd scented with lavender oil. The little knife she'd brought from the kitchen lay on the marble tile

within easy reach, but she hadn't cut herself yet. The little girl floated a few inches off the floor in the corner of the room, adding a purple glow to the orange candlelight.
"I like your dress," Phyrea told the little girl. "It's pretty."
The girl grimaced—an expression that looked wrong on her baby face—but she didn't say anything. After a tenday at Berrywilde, they had spoken enough.
They'd told her again and again that Pristoleph meant to destroy them. They told her that her father was still alive but that he'd abandoned her, and the only family she had left was them. They begged her to kill herself, then they demanded that she do it, then they begged some more. They made her cry more than once, and she even put a knife to her throat one night. She looked the old woman in the eyes, then, and the desperation she saw there, the longing, almost made her slit her own throat, but she didn't. Even days later she didn't know why she'd spared her own life.
Just then all she wanted was to sit in a lavender-scented bath, close her eyes, and soak as much in the silence as the water.
You've already become one of us, you know, the little girl said. You just don't know it yet.
Phyrea looked at her, met her eyes, and smiled. The girl faded away.
And that was when she heard her name.
She closed her eyes and whispered, "Leave me alone. I'll die soon enough."
Phyrea.
She shook her head and was about to speak, when the voice came again.
Stay away from the canal.
"Ivar," she said, and her eyes flickered open.
She sat up in the tub and looked behind her. There he was—made of the same violet light as the rest of them.
Phyrea, I know you can hear me.
"Ivar," she whispered. "Can you see me?"
She looked at his eyes, but they didn't meet hers. He stood, his feet an inch off the floor, and he looked up at the ceiling. When he spoke, the movement of his lips didn't quite match the sound of his voice—a voice that sounded in her head, but not in her ears.
Tell Pristoleph. It isn't safe.
"Where are you?" she asked, the sound of her own voice so loud in the otherwise silent house that it startled her. I'm not there. I'll find you.
She blinked and he was gone. "Ivar?" she whispered.
She gasped and held the breath. She rose to her knees and came part of the way out of the bath water. There was no sign of him, and no sound in either her ears or her head. Tears welled in her eyes and she

wiped them away with a lavender-scented forearm.
"Ivar?" she whispered. "What's happened?"
There's no one here named Ivar, the man with the scar on his face said.
The cool violet glow once again mixed with the candlelight, but she didn't look at it. She knew it wasn't Devorast.
"He was here," Phyrea whispered.
No one was here, the man said.
They didn't see him, Phyrea thought. They didn't hear him.
She let herself sink back into the tub so that only her face was above water.
"Why would he warn me away?" she whispered.
Because he is finished with you, said the old woman.
He doesn't want you anymore, the melancholy woman added.
"He looked like you," Phyrea whispered. "Is he dead?"
She sat up straight in the tub, her jaw clenched tight and her hands shaking.
"He's dead," she said, again too loudly, startling herself and sloshing water from the tub. It splashed onto the knife, which slid a few inches across the slick marble floor.
"Is he dead?" she whispered, and reached for the knife.
She gasped for a breath and felt her chest tighten around her heart as though her own body meant to squeeze the life out of her.
"Ivar?" she gasped. "Are you alive?"
No, the old woman said. He's dead.
He has to be dead, the little girl said.
There's only one way to see him now, said the sad woman.
Phyrea sank the blade of the kitchen knife into her forearm and screamed through the pain that made her hands stop shaking. She cut herself again and she could breathe.
She held her eyes closed until the initial wave of pain passed, then she opened them to see that the room was lit only by the orange glow of her candles.

23 Tarsakh, the Yearof Lightning Storms (1374 DR) Pristal Towers, Innarlith
The forces aligned against you are too great," Wenefir said.
He stared at Pristoleph, waiting for some response, but the ransar sat in silence, staring at the crystal balls. Not one of them showed anything but a reflection of the room in which they sat. They had stopped working all at once, and the arcane words that Marek Rymiit had given Pristoleph failed to bring them back to life.
"Ransar?" Wenefir asked.
Still Pristoleph sat in silence, ignoring his seneschal. "Pristoleph...."

Wenefir said.
Pristoleph's hair flickered on his head, and Wenefir brought to mind the spell that would keep him from being burned should the ransar's temper once again get the better of him.
"Is it raining?" Pristoleph asked.
"Wh—pardon me?" Wenefir responded. "Is it raining... outside?"
Pristoleph nodded. "Yes, Ransar."
"I thought so," said Pristoleph. "I could feel it."
"Yes, well, be that as it may," Wenefir pressed on, keeping his voice low and calm. "I'm convinced you must allow Kurtsson and Aikiko to finish the canal their way. Master Rymiit will provide for the operation of the portal. He's willing to entertain a mutually acceptable arrangement for the collection of tolls and associated fees for that service. The Thayan Enclave will maintain the magic and guarantee its safety and accuracy."
Pristoleph smoothed one of his eyebrows with the tip of a finger. Wenefir had never seen that gesture.
"As your closest advisor," Wenefir went on, "I advise you to agree to this."
"Do you?" Pristoleph asked. He didn't seem surprised, and Wenefir could tell he was disappointed.
"There's nothing for it, Pristoleph," he said.
The ransar smiled and said, "There's always..."
After a moment, Wenefir realized that Pristoleph didn't intend to finish his thought, so he said, "Is it that
bad? Is it really some defeat?" "Wenefir-"
"It has come down to a simple choice," Wenefir interrupted, and pressed on even when Pristoleph turned to give him a dangerous look. "The time has come to choose between Ivar Devorast and Marek Rymiit."
"Has it?" Pristoleph asked, his eyes flashing yellow. "Has it really come down to that? And of course you would have me chose the Thayan."
"The Thayan, yes," Wenefir said. "And why not? It was the Thayan that helped make you ransar, after all, not Devorast. You want a canal. You want ships to stop in Innarlith from the ports of Cormyr and Sembia on their way to Baldur's Gate and Waterdeep, and vice versa. What could it possibly matter to you if those ships float on water or on magic?"
Pristoleph looked away, again staring at the blank, useless crystal balls. Wenefir sighed and his shoulders sagged.
"I'm tired," Wenefir said.
"Tired of me?" the ransar asked. "After all these years?"
Wenefir took a moment to consider his answer then said, "No, Pristoleph. The truth is I still admire you. In-ways that I'll probably

never understand I'm still that gutter kid, the castrated chimney rat that you rescued, that you dragged up with you into a life worth living."
"What then?"
"I'm tired of being dragged," Wenefir admitted, "up or otherwise."
"I didn't drag you to Cyric," Pristoleph said.
"Careful, now," Wenefir replied, bringing to mind a prayer that would do much more than protect him from fire. "Invoke his name at your peril, Ransar."
Pristoleph sighed and ran his fingers through his flamelike hair.
"Why not choose everything?" the priest asked.
"Everything?"
"Everything," Wenefir replied. "The Thayan's magic, the support of the senate, the rights and privileges of Ransar of Innarlith, and the canal."
"I thought I had," the ransar said.
"Is that what you wish me to convey to the Thayan?" Wenefir asked.
He waited while Pristoleph sat in silence. It didn't appear as though the ransar was thinking it over. He seemed to just be sitting there. Wenefir hoped that was a good sign. He'd never seen Pristoleph, not in the forty-four years of their friendship, resign himself to anything, but Wenefir hoped there was a first time for everything.
"Where is Willem Korvan?" Pristoleph asked.
Wenefir blinked and shook his head, surprised by the question.
"Wenefir?" the ransar prompted.
"No one knows," Wenefir replied.
"He will have to be found," Pristoleph said. "He must be put down for the murder of Surero."
Wenefir didn't smile, but he wanted to. He said, "I'm certain that between Marek Rymiit and myself, with Cyric's blessing, he will be found. And when he is, he will face the ransar's justice."
"And in return for that," Pristoleph said, "I will have to allow Kurtsson and Aikiko to finish the canal. I will have to betray the promise I made, the word I gave, to Ivar Devorast."
"Yes," Wenefir said, not happy with the way things were starting to go.
"And the fact that Devorast is a better man than any of them together, a greater man, a man more worthy of so great an undertaking, matters not at all."
"I understand that it matters to you, my friend," Wenefir said. "But you are ransar now. Not every decision is an easy one, and not every decision can be made based on your admiration for one man's ideas."
"The world turns on the ideas of one man."
Wenefir chewed on his bottom lip, for all appearances | considering thcransar's point, but instead he just stood i waiting
"That's not much of a trade for one murderous senator," Pristoleph

said.
"It's not the canal for Korvan," Wenefir said, stepping forward for emphasis, because he absolutely needed to be heard. "If you allow Marek Rymiit's people to finish the canal, you will be allowed to remain as ransar."
Wenefir didn't breathe again until it became painful. He knew Pristoleph wouldn't like anything about the words "be allowed to," but knowing him for more than four decades gave him only moderate insight into what he would do in response.
"Do you have an answer I can convey to the enclave?" Wenefir asked.
"No," Pristoleph said, not looking at him, barely raising his voice enough to be heard. "Your services as seneschal are no longer required."
59_
23 Tarsakh, the Yearof Lightning Storms (1374 DR) The Canal Site

I^hyrea called his name again and again but there was no answer. The rain pounded from the night sky, and thunder rumbled all around her. The deluge drowned out her voice, but still Phyrea worried that Ivar Devorast was dead.
After seeing his spectral form she thought that she should have listened to him and stayed away, but finally she decided she had to go there. She had to find him and see him. She had to know one way or another if he was alive or dead.
"I'll leave him," she shouted into the driving rain. Rainwater mixed with spittle flew from her lips. Her long dark
hair was plastered to her head, and her light riding silks and wool vest were so heavy, her shoulders slumped under the weight. "Ivar!"
She pulled on her horse's bridle and the animal shook its head out of her grasp. She turned and grabbed the leather strap again, sneering and growling at the horse until its head bowed and it took a step forward. A deafening crash of thunder seemed to burst the sky apart and the horse started again. The beast rose up on its hind legs, jerking her arm. A stab of pain lanced through her shoulder before her fingers slipped from the bridle and she swore.
Her mount bounded backward a few steps, and when Phyrea reached once more for the bridle the horse turned and ran at speed into the black night. She lost sight of it a scant moment later, and even the sound of its pounding hooves disappeared behind the roar of the storm.
With another unseemly curse, Phyrea turned back to the canal, banishing the startled horse from her mind. She squinted into the rain and sloshed through muddy grass to the edge of the canal. She looked down into darkness and called for Ivar Devorast.
The darkness seemed to move closer into her from all sides. Blinking, rubbing her eyes, opening them as wide as she could and holding them open even when wind-driven rain stung at them, Phyrea still couldn't see.
Something's wrong, the sad woman who cried over the corpse of her only child said, her voice clear in Phyrea's head despite the rain and thunder. I don't like this. I don't like this at all.
Step off, the little boy said, and Phyrea shook her head so hard and so fast that her own soaking-wet hair whipped her face.
She opened her mouth wide and screamed into the uncaring storm.
He's dead, the man with the scar on his face said. Why did you come here?
"Why did I come here?" Phyrea asked the ghosts, the storm, anyone who would listen.
You love him as much as you hate yourself, said the old woman.

You know he's dead, said the man with the scar, but you don't want to believe it.
Step off the damned edge, the little boy demanded.
Phyrea started to cry, her tears disappearing into the rain and wind. She thought she heard the little girl crying too, but couldn't be sure.
He's dead, the grieving woman said. They're both dead. We're all dead.
"No," Phyrea said, her voice gravelly and ragged.
She could feel the ghosts inside her and knew the contempt they felt for her, at that moment more than ever before. She could feel their frustration and anger with her. They wanted her dead. They wanted her to join them, wanted her to stay with them forever, inside the cold, silent walls of Berrywilde. She was the last of her family, and when she was gone what would happen to that estate?
"Why do you want me?" she asked them.
Because you wanted us, the man with the scar on his face said. You came to us. You sent everyone else away and you sat in that house like the ghost you were fated to be. You sat in silence and you cut yourself. You hurt yourself because you hated yourself. You opened yourself to us. You wanted us, as much as we wanted you.
"Wanted?" she whispered.
The feeling that came to her in response made her blink. Dizzy, she staggered back from the edge of the canal and almost fell.
"You don't want me anymore?" she whispered.
Of course we do, the old woman replied, her voice soothing. Come back with us, to Berrywilde.
Forever, the little girl said.
Phyrea rubbed the rainwater and tears from her eyes and stepped forward, to the very edge of the canal.
Lightning flashed, and for a moment the space around her was lit as though it was high noon. The canal was deep-deep enough that the fall would kill her—and rainwater had started to collect at the bottom, enough so that it had filled to a depth of nearly an inch.
"It's filling up," she said into the pitch dark that followed the transient illumination of the lightning.
Step over the side, the little boy begged. Please, Mommy?
Phyrea gasped and stepped back.
"No," she whispered. "It's filling with water. It's going to work."
Phyrea looked up, and when another flash of lightning gave her an instant's sight, she looked down the length of the canal, which disappeared over the horizon. It was the most incredible thing she'd ever seen in her life.
"I did," she said when it was dark again. She stopped crying but shivered in the cool rain. "I went there to give up, and I almost did, but then he showed me there was a reason to live. He showed me that

it was for me to decide—"
She stopped when the ground beneath her trembled. It felt as though the world itself shivered in the rain.
More lightning flashed on the horizon, but it didn't go away as fast as it should have, and it was the wrong color, and there was more—and Phyrea realized it wasn't lightning at all.
Turning to the north, her breath trapped in her lungs, her eyes and mouth wide open to the driving rain, Phyrea watch enormous balls of yellow-orange light mushroom over the horizon. Each was followed several heartbeats later by a low rumble, each one louder than the last, and the tremors grew stronger, too.
"Oh," she breathed. "Oh, no."
Another explosion of orange fire, then another, and another. They marched down the length of the canal, on both sides, and ground-shaking tremors followed in their wakes.
Phyrea's feet felt frozen in place, as though nailed to the ground at the edge of the canal. The light from the explosions grew brighter, the sounds louder, and soon the cacophony of the pounding thunderstorm was drowned out by the continuing series of massive explosions.
Closer and closer they came and finally Phyrea moved one foot. She turned and the ground bucked under her, rattling her knee and numbing the bottoms of her feet. She stumbled, but rose to her feet even as another tremor shook the ground. She ran through a Shockwave that smashed into her ears. The roar of the explosions were dulled, overwhelmed by a piercing ringing in her ears.
Phyrea glanced over one shoulder, and another explosion blossomed behind her, so close there was no delay before the sound of it took the rest of her hearing until all that was left was an agonizing wail. She screamed as she ran, her mind racing through prayers, pleading for help. She wanted Devorast to save her, but she knew for certain then that he must be dead. If he lived, he never would have allowed his greatest masterpiece to be destroyed.
The next explosion lifted her off her feet. She whirled through the air, entirely unable to control her own body. Her arms flailed, hitting herself in the face. She felt her right knee bend sideways, and the jarring pain pushed bile into her throat. She couldn't breathe or even retch as she flew through air that had become searingly hot. She couldn't open her eyes, and she couldn't close her mouth.
Another explosion lifted her higher into the air just an instant before she hit the ground. It was hotter still, and she screamed when the rainwater in her hair began to boil. Her scream rattled her ears and the wail seemed to harmonize with it. The last bit of air was driven from her lungs and her scream cut off. There was another explosion, but it wasn't as hot, and Phyrea could feel herself falling. She wanted

to move somehow, so she whirled her arms and tried to run, but the pain from her ruined knee sent lightning flashing behind her eyelids. The
only sound left was something that could have come from inside or out, but to Phyrea it sounded like the scream of stone, the death rattle of the canal itself.
She hit the ground so hard her head nearly came off her shoulders. She felt bones snap all over her body, and as consciousness fled her she was glad that she'd landed in the cold mud. It soothed her charred skin.
60
23 Tarsakh, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR) Pristal Towers, Innarlith
The floor shook, and though Pristoleph wasn't sleeping, the sudden motion roused him from a fitful rest. He sat up in bed and looked around in the dark. Phyrea was at Berrywilde, and save for the crackle of the fire in the wide marble fireplace, there was no sound, and no one else in the room.
The floor shook again, making the bed quiver under him. That time he was sure it wasn't just his imagination. He threw off the bedclothes and stood just as the door burst open.
"Second Chief Gahrzig," Pristoleph said to the wemic in the doorway, "what was that?"
The lion-barbarian said, "You had better come and see."
In the time it took Gahrzig to say that, the ransar had donned a dressing gown and crossed to the door. The wemic led the way, trundling along the wide, high-ceilinged corridors with a clatter of weapons and armor, and the tapping of his sharp claws on the polished marble. By the time they reached a circular stairway that wound its way up to the top of the highest tower, the wemic had broken into a run, and Pristoleph panted trying to keep up with him.
The building shook again and again as they climbed the stairs. The motion was just strong enough to be felt, and at no time did Pristoleph feel as though it would knock him
off his feet, or that it would put the structural integrity of his great manor in peril. Still, the ground shouldn't shake like that, despite the storm that raged outside.
When they came to the topmost room they were greeted by three of Gahrzig's wemics, who stood with wide eyes, clutching at their enchanted spears with tense hands. Pristoleph went to a window on the northwestern wall of the room to look out over his city, and his jaw fell open at what he saw.
A fierce orange glow lit the far horizon, brighter even than the lights of the city that stretched out below him. Lightning flashed all around

and a strong wind whipped rain against the windows. The orange glow reflected in the droplets that clung to the glass, and on the faces of the wemics that stared off into the distance, unsure how to react to something they didn't understand. The floor trembled again and in a moment the orange glow brightened and expanded. Pristoleph put a hand against the window frame and waited. It took a long time for the Shockwave to travel from the source of the orange light, but when it did, he felt the floor once more quiver under his bare feet.

"What is it, Ransar?" Gahrzig asked, his throaty voice quiet, muffled by awe.

"The canal," Pristoleph whispered back, the sound of his own words making his eyes burn. "It's the canal."

The wemic shook his head. He didn't understand, but Pristoleph didn't want to explain. He touched his head to the cool glass and closed his eyes to hold the tears in. The glass steamed, made opaque by the heat of his forehead, and he stepped back. The distant orange glows continued to flare, one after another, tracing a line along the canal, straight from the north to the south. Each one grew brighter, and the floor shook just a little more each time.

"Everyone in the city must be able to feel it—even see it—now," Gahrzig said. "What do we do?"

Pristoleph shook his head. By the time any of them made it out there what was happening would have long finished. Whatever it was, whatever cataclysm had befallen the canal, could hardly be stopped from miles away in the middle of a storm-ravaged night.

"We watch it," Pristoleph said. "That's all we can do."

The wemic nodded. He seemed satisfied, but then Gahrzig and his tribe cared nothing of the canal, if they even understood what it was, and what it would mean to Innarlith.

"Phyrea," Pristoleph whispered, the name coming unbidden to his lips.

"Ransar?" asked the wemic mercenary.

Pristoleph looked at him and blinked. He didn't know why he'd spoken her name—and why, when he had, his heart sank in his chest. He held his left hand up in front of his face and saw sweat glisten in his palm.

"Ransar?" the wemic asked again.

Pristoleph said, "Nothing."

"You're worried about your female," the wemic stated, his voice pitched to reassure his employer.

The ransar nodded at first then shook his head. "No," he said. "Phyrea is at Berrywilde—her family's country estate."

"Out of the city," said Gahrzig. "Good. Safer. But where is—?"

"To the east," Pristoleph interrupted. "Far away from the canal."

Pristoleph couldn't resist looking off through the windows that faced east. No fiery light glowed on that horizon. It wasn't even early

enough for the first hint of dawn. Thunder crashed, close and loud, startling both Pristoleph and Gahrzig, who also stared off into the east at darkness only occasional split by jagged bolts of lightning.
"She is safe, then," the wemic said.
Pristoleph watched more brilliant orange explosions plume up from the northwestern horizon.
61
23 Tarsakh, the Yearof Lightning Storms (1374 DR) The Canal Site
Hrothgar had never in his whole life felt himself shake so badly. It was as though his very bones quivered. His skin crawled, and the hair—all of his hair, all over his body, and that was a lot—stood on end. He was sure that his gums were peeling back from his teeth. His eyes watered and his head throbbed.
The force of any one of the explosions would have been enough to rattle anyone, even a sturdy dwarf like Hrothgar. A series of them, one after another, dozens upon dozens marching in a line nearly forty miles from the Nagaflow on the north end to the Lake of Steam at the south end, made Hrothgar think that Faerun, even Toril itself, was splitting in two.
But finally the explosions passed, lighting the sky at the far horizon, shaking the ground for a long time after the last of the shards of stone and wood had fallen, and eventually even the ground stopped shaking and the horizon went dark. The rain never ceased, though, and for once Hrothgar was thankful for it. The cool rain calmed his heat-nettled skin and made steam billow up from his scorched clothes and hair.
He fell as much as ran to Devorast's side. The Cormyrean lay face down in the mud, and Hrothgar didn't know if he was dead or alive. He grabbed the man by his torn and ragged vest and turned him over. The effort, which should have been nothing for the strong and hearty dwarf, nearly exhausted him. Devorast, limp and covered in mud and soaked to the skin, seemed to weigh a ton.
When his face was turned to the pelting rain, the human blinked and sputtered. While Devorast coughed Hrothgar laughed. Tears streamed down his bearded
face to add their salt to the rain, and he put a hand on Devorast's chest, to feel his heart beating. Lightning flashed overhead, and when the thunder rumbled behind it, Devorast opened his eyes. He blinked a few times before he finally made eye contact with the dwarf. Hrothgar stopped laughing, the smile melting from his lips.
Devorast put his hands over his eyes and clawed the mud off his face. He tried to sit up but winced and groaned in pain.
"Lay back," Hrothgar advised him, but when the ground shifted beneath them, he changed his mind.

He'd thought it was over, but he was wrong.
"The hill is shifting," Hrothgar said as he grabbed Devorast by the collar. "I'm carryin' you outta here."
"Void..." Devorast mumbled, then grunted when Hrothgar draped him over his broad shoulder.
"Void is right, by Moradin's Beard," Hrothgar said.
The explosions had opened a space in the ground beneath them, a void, and the heavy, wet ground was sinking to fill it. Hrothgar knew enough about mining, about digging, about holes in the ground to know that it would sink slowly at first, settling, trying to redistribute its weight, then it would collapse all at once, and anyone unlucky or stupid enough to be standing on top of it would be swallowed whole by Toril herself.
"Come, boy," Hrothgar growled.
He dragged Devorast's feet behind him, the human too tall for him to properly carry, but at that moment the dwarf didn't care if he left body parts in his wake, as long as he got himself and his friend out of there before—
The ground collapsed behind them and Hrothgar shouted a very old curse in his native tongue, one that should have brought either the mercy or the wrath of every god in Dwarf home.
Devorast stiffened and turned, falling out of Hrothgar's grip. The dwarf bellowed his name, but his voice was lost in the thunderous crash of the collapsing hillside. Hrothgar,
propelled as much by the wavelike motion of the muddy ground beneath his feet as his feet themselves, continued to run and though his mind had dropped into a primal panic, he was aware enough to see Devorast running under his own power, right next to him.
Side by side they ran for their lives.
Instinct and experience took them away from the canal, but one huge chunk of broken stone after another—debris blasted away by the explosions—turned them this way and that, and soon enough Hrothgar lost all sense of direction. He ran and ran, dodging smoldering wood, and fires still blazing even under the pouring rain. He bounced off a block of stone, tripped on something he didn't stop to identify, grabbed Devorast's arm to help him along, or was grabbed and helped along by Devorast.
When the shaking and the rumbling finally stopped again, the two of them stumbled in an effort to stop. The dwarf fell and slid, for a moment completely out of control, down a steep, muddy hill. He rolled to a stop only after tripping Devorast and the two of them ended up tangled together at the bottom of the incline, half-floating in six inches of standing water.
Hrothgar untangled himself from the human while he -coughed out

half a lungful of rainwater and pawed mud from his stinging right eye. Devorast was breathing so hard he seemed to almost gasp for breath.
When lightning flashed again and lit them both Hrothgar was shocked by two things: how horrible they both looked—like sea hags on the worst days of their lives—and that they were still alive. They'd lived.
"What were the chances?" Hrothgar asked himself.
Devorast shook his head and struggled to his knees. The dwarf stood, knee-deep in water, and looked around. The lightning was fast moving to the eastern horizon, but the rain still fell hard and steady. He turned his face up to the black, unforgiving sky, and let the rain wash the mud from his face. If the dirt was mixed with his blood or
Devorast's, Hrothgar couldn't tell. He hurt all over, but he could breathe and he could stand. Any dwarf that could breathe and stand was just fine.
Devorast stood next to him and took a deep breath.
Lightning played along the horizon, outlining a jumble of broken stone and scarred earth.
"Don't look at it," Hrothgar said.
Devorast turned and smiled. The simple curl of his lips sent a shiver coursing through Hrothgar the dwarf was sure would finally shake him apart.
"I want you to promise me somethin'," Hrothgar said, and though he found it nearly impossible, he looked the Cormyrean in the eye. "Promise that you'll never, ever, should we both live for another ten thousand years, tell me why."
The smile faded from Devorast's lips and he nodded.
Hrothgar stepped away and busied himself with trying to get more of the mud off him. The rain let up a little, but the wind increased, which made the rain seem so much colder. Hrothgar's teeth chattered and his toes went numb in his boots.
When Devorast placed a hand on his shoulder, the dwarf didn't even have the energy to be startled.
He looked up and saw Devorast run away from him.
"Ivar?" he called after the human.
"Phyrea!" Devorast screamed into a wind-blown wave of rain.
"Phyrea?" Hrothgar asked the human's receding back.
Hrothgar stood and thought for a moment, the cold making him think as slowly as he moved. Finally he started off after Devorast. The dwarf slipped a few times on his way around a bulge in the ground, and his ankle rolled painfully on a piece of broken lumber, but he eventually limped to Devorast's side.
The Cormyrean kneeled in the mud next to what Hrothgar thought at first was the twisted remains of a scaffold or some other wooden structure. Though there was

no shortage of that all around them, Devorast knelt before a body.
"Phyrea...." Hrothgar whispered. "She dead?"
Devorast shook his head and Hrothgar almost sobbed, but then the girl moved and he gasped instead.
"She's alive," the dwarf said, joining Devorast on the ground.
Phyrea lay face up in water and mud. Her left leg was twisted behind her, her hip shattered. Her left arm bent at an abrupt angle that made it appear as though she had two elbows. Blood clouded the standing water. She breathed, but only with obvious difficulty. Exhales came followed by trickles of blood.
"Phyrea," Devorast whispered. "Why?"
"Come," said the dwarf. "We need to make a stretcher, and tie her nice and tight to it."
Devorast glanced at him and nodded, but he didn't stand or show any sign that he was about to leave the dying girl's side.
Hrothgar took a deep breath and went to work.
62_
30 Tarsakh, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR) The Sisterhood of Pastorals, Innarlith
One man held his ankles to the floor, two more held his hands, and the fourth kneeled on his chest, tangled a grubby hand in his hair, and cut him. Once, twice, then a third time. His own blood felt so hot it seemed to burn his face. When he opened his mouth to scream he could taste it.
She held her baby's head up, her soft, wispy hair in the palm of one hand. When she let the slight weight push her hand down, her baby's neck gave no resistance. The infant was limp and still, her skin already going cold. A tear dropped onto the baby's forehead and rolled down her
cheek. Her dead eyes dry, it was left to her mother to cry for her.
He screamed when his arm came away from his body, but not because of the pain. It didn't even hurt, really, not like you'd think it would. He screamed because he knew that he would live the rest of his life without it. As young as he was, barely seven years old, he screamed from the horror or having been mutilated. Startled, perhaps even guilty at the sound of the boy's scream, the dog took a better grip on the bleeding, disembodied limb, and ran away with it in his jaws. The boy screamed after it as his blood poured away onto the floor of his bedroom.
She batted her face with her hands but succeeded only in burning her palms. The oil had had time to soak into her skin, and when her husband touched the torch to her face the burns dug deep. She took a breath to scream and seared her own lungs. She coughed and choked and writhed in blind agony. Her fear turned to anger, then there was

no word for the emotions that exploded in her as her brain began to cook in her skull. She died a feral thing, overwhelmed by agony, chewing through her own tongue.

The little girl took her last breath on the day after her ninth birthday. Dressed in her finest nightgown, on her back under bedclothes of the softest silk and goose down, the woman her mother hired to care for her holding her hand in a cold, dry, unwelcome grip, she stared up at the ceiling over her bed and wondered how long it would take her to die, and if she would find herself in another world. She knew she didn't want to go. She wanted to stay home. She wanted to stay at Berrywilde. She didn't care about the gods and their punishments and rewards. If her soul stayed home, could she find some way to make her mommy love her? She was still asking that question when she felt her heart stop. Before her vision fled her, she saw the nanny shrug, stand, and walk away.

The woman's face hovered in the air above her in a way that wasn't natural, that wasn't right. Her smile was the
warmest thing.she'd ever seen, and the light that shone from her perfect, glowing skin washed away the images of pain and torture and hopelessness. When she spoke, her lips didn't move, but the words filled an empty space that brought the world of the living together with the world of the dead.

Wake up, now, girl, the goddess said. You lived.

Phyrea drew in a breath and held it. Her eyes stung and watered from a light that was at once blinding and muted. Pain lanced through her, shoving her into consciousness, warning her that she should awake and take stock of herself or die. She tried to sit up, but something held her down—a hand on her chest.

"Easy there," a familiar voice whispered.

"Father?" she guessed, her voice coming to her own ears as a ragged, alien rasp.

"Phyrea," the man said. "Breathe deeply."

"Pristoleph," she whispered, and her voice sounded almost like her own.

She took a deep breath and smelled and tasted incense and sickness.

She took another breath and the dull throb of pain subsided, replaced by jabbing pinpoints here and there—her hip, her arm, her head. She opened her eyes.

"There you are," Pristoleph said, his voice as soft as the look in his eyes. His hair waved like fire on his scalp, and the warmth of his hand in hers drove off the chill touch of death. "There you are."

She turned her head, doing her best to ignore the pain that accompanied any movement at all. She lay on her back on a narrow bed set against the rough brick wall of a room no bigger than one of

the smaller closets in Berrywilde or Pristal Towers. No artwork adorned the walls, but there was a window with cobalt blue glass that bathed the room in a cool, suppressed light. A candle burned on a short chest of drawers, backlighting Pristoleph, who sat at her bedside on a stool.

"What happened?" she asked, but even then the memories flooded back. "The canal," she rasped before Pristoleph could answer.

"Destroyed," he told her, but she knew that. She'd seen it happen and had nearly been destroyed with it. "How?" she asked.

"Devorast and that alchemist of his," Pristoleph answered, and she shook her head. She didn't care how the canal had been destroyed, she wanted to know how she'd lived, but as he went on she realized it didn't matter. "He was afraid that it was going to be completed by someone else, that his vision was to be perverted by the Thayan and his cronies."

"Ivar?" she whispered, and a tear came unbidden to the corner of her eye.

Pristoleph sagged a little, in the face and in the body, and his hair looked less like fire.

"He's alive," her husband said. "He brought you here. Devorast and the dwarf."

Phyrea tried to nod.

"He saved me?" she said. It didn't seem possible—hadn't she gone there to save him? Or had she gone there to die with him?

Pristoleph nodded and said, "Why, Phyrea? I thought you safe at Berrywilde."

She shook her head in an effort to tell him that she didn't know why, and that she wasn't safe at Berrywilde, at any rate.

"Was he right?" she rasped.

"Devorast?" asked Pristoleph. "About the canal?"

She nodded.

"No," he said with stern self-confidence. "The city is divided. That much is true. I've turned the black firedrakes out of Pristal Towers for fear that they might betray me in favor of Rymiit. I have it on good authority that it was the Thayan that created them—or brought them here from whatever dark corner of the Realms he found
them in. But I have the wemics, and I still control most of the military—the men at Firesteap Citadel and the Naga-flow Keep. The city watch is doing just that—watching, but doing little else. Fires are burning down parts of the Fourth Quarter, despite the rain."

Phyrea didn't understand any of that at first. She shook her head, wincing at the pain.

"Ivar?" she asked.

"He's safe," Pristoleph said, and he appeared reluctant to speak. "He's

in Pristal Towers. He's talked of Shou Lung—going there again, for good this time."
Phyrea shook her head and sobbed though it hurt her to do so.
"I love you," Pristoleph said. "Had you died I would have given this wretched city to the Thayan and been done with it, but you lived, so I will hold it for you. I will give it to you, along with everything I have. I will kill myself here and now if the gods require my life in exchange for yours, but know this." He paused, swallowed, gathered himself. "If you take him into your bed or go with him to his I will kill you both."
Phyrea closed her eyes and cried.
63_
6 Mirtul, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR) Second Quarter, Innarlith
Willem Korvan ate his mother's corpse, little by little, over the course of seventeen days, not because he required sustenance, but out of some dimly-felt sense of necessity.
Marek Rymiit could feel the undead thing's need and confusion the second he stepped into the house. It hit him just as squarely, though not quite as hard, as the stench. The smell of the rotting carcass of Thurene Korvan mixed with the dried-meat and spice smell of her son. Throughout was the tang of disease.
"Willem," the Thayan whispered, "you poor dear."
The creature cowered at the sight of the Red Wizard who'd created it, its dull, glassy eyes devoid of any trace of the vibrant if confused young man that had once inhabited that flesh. Willem's refined good looks had been replaced by desiccated tissue and bulging joints, his skin like a leather cloak left on the street for a year of sun, wind, and rain.
It opened its mouth but didn't speak. Marek's skin crawled at the sound that came forth from it, and he cast another spell to insure his own safety. He was confident enough in the magic that gave him complete control of what was left of the creature's will, but there were mitigating circumstances that made the wizard uneasy.
"It's been a long time, Willem," he said to the cowering creature.
The thing responded to Marek's voice but showed no trace of recognition either for the Thayan or for the sound of his own name. But then it wasn't his—its—name anymore. The creature that cowered in the corner, one foot tangled in the grisly ribcage of Willem Korvan's mother, had no name. It didn't need one. It had no will of its own, not really, because it didn't need that either.
"I am sorry," Marek told the thing, and he didn't lie. He didn't have to. "There are any number of other paths I wish both our lives had taken. You were beautiful, Willem, and I could have loved you—if you could have loved me. But you wanted more than that, and I suppose so did

I."
The creature rolled its eyes and clacked its teeth together—confused, awaiting an order.
"I didn't want to make a monster out of you, you know," said the Thayan.
One of the monster's arms twitched.
"But I have, haven't I?" Marek concluded. "And I've set a task for you. One you have yet to complete."
The undead thing drew its knee up to its chest, pulling the body of its mother with it. The torso came away from the
limbs, the cartilage and ligaments having long since been chewed through. A fresh wave of rotting stink washed over Marek and he gagged despite himself.
"Rise," Marek said when he'd composed himself.
Its foot still tangled in the ribs, slipping against the tattered strips of rotten flesh that dangled from the graying bones, it rose to its feet with some difficulty. Its foot finally came free and it stood slumped to one side as though the slightest breath would topple it.
"But it won't," Marek whispered to himself.
It would take more than that—much more than that—to defeat his creation. Though it looked wasted and weak, Marek knew that the creature Willem had become was possessed of strength no human could match. It could be destroyed, but not easily—not easily at all.
"You have huddled long enough, my boy," Marek said, his voice clear and commanding, echoing in the dead space, the horrid little charnel house that Willem's home had become. "The war has begun. You will serve now as you have before."
The creature's head tipped to one side—a death rattle more than a gesture.
"You still have Ivar Devorast to kill," Marek said.
The monster's leg shook and it lurched half a step forward. The Thayan held his ground.
"Ivar Devorast," he said, "among others."
64_
10 Mirtul, the Yearof Lightning Storms (1374 Dffl Pristal Towers, Innarlith
A. cloud of greasy black smoke brushed against the outside of the glass and Pristoleph breathed deeply of its pungent odor. A human—someone fully human at any rate—would have choked and gagged, even with the glass between him and the smoke, but Pristoleph's lungs, which
had as much in common with his elemental father's as his human mother's, took in the smoke with something bordering on relish.
"Your city burns, Ransar," Wenefir said.

The sound of his former confidante's voice rankled him, and he could feel his hair stir and warm. He closed his hands into hot fists, but kept his consciousness away from the torches that burned in the sunlit chamber.
He could see Wenefir—a vague outline of him, anyway-reflected in the glass. He was flanked by two wemics who nervously pawed at the floor, their eyes locked on the priest.
"Ransar?" Wenefir asked.
Pristoleph took a deep breath that he hoped would let Wenefir know that he would answer in his own time.
The tower room fell silent, save for the fidgeting wemics, and Pristoleph's eyes darted from fire to fire. Below him the Fourth Quarter burned. Not all of it, but enough of it to send ragged refugees streaming into the Third Quarter or out the eastern gate. He was too high up to see the gangs of watchmen alternately helping and harrying them. The peasants of the Fourth Quarter had precious little to steal, but word had come to him of rape and murder, of humiliations extreme and petty.
"It doesn't take much, does it?" Pristoleph asked.
"Ransar?" Wenefir replied.
"To set people on their neighbors," the ransar went on. "It doesn't take much to turn men into beasts, brothers into enemies...."
"I'm not so sure of that," the priest answered.
Pristoleph turned to face him, an eyebrow raised. Wenefir wilted almost imperceptibly under his gaze, but managed to stand straight and—almost—look him in the eye.
"Terrible events and powerful forces conspired to bring this chaos to the streets of the city-state," Wenefir said.
"Was that it?" Pristoleph joked, a forced lightness in his voice that he couldn't possibly have felt at that moment. "Or was it terrible forces and powerful events?"
"As you wish, Ransar," Wenefir replied with a smirk.
"Neither," Pristoleph said, all traces of gaiety fled from his voice and his manner. "Men made smoke rise over Innarlith. And perhaps one god."
"Tread lightly on that path," Wenefir warned, "if at all, Ransar."
The wemics beside him stiffened and sniffed at the threat. Second Chief Gahrzig came up the stairs as if on cue and scowled at the former seneschal.
"Make one move to work your magic, priest," the mercenary leader threatened, "and I'll drop you where you stand."
Wenefir glanced at the wemic and Pristoleph could tell the priest believed him.
"He won't require an order from me to do so, my old friend,"

Pristoleph added.
Wenefir said, "Understood, Ransar, but I have not come here to ensorcell you."
"I think I know why you've come here," said Pristoleph.
"Believe what you will of me, Pristoleph," Wenefir said, and the ransar couldn't help but notice something of his old friend, that weak little boy he'd saved from a short life on the streets, in the sound of his voice, "but know that I hold this city dear. It is my home. I do my god's work here."
Pristoleph couldn't help but smile at that. "You've taught me enough of your god's ways over the years, you know. This—" and he jerked his head in the direction of another plume of smoke that blew past the window—"is precisely the sort of work your god values the most."
"Be that as it may," the Cyricist said, too quickly, "I come to offer advice."
"You have been discharged," the ransar reminded him. "You no longer serve the city-state, as my seneschal or in any other capacity."
"Then take this as advice from a friend, Pristoleph. Take it as a warning from an enemy, if you must, but heed it. Heed me."
The wemics tensed again and Gahrzig drew steel. Pristoleph glanced at the wemic chieftain, but the second chiefs eyes stayed on Wenefir.
"Speak," Pristoleph said.
"The senate is against you," said Wenefir. "What few allies you had have either turned or been killed. Blood runs in the streets, fires rage in the Second Quarter, too, now, and none of them will long stand for that."
"They know how to stop this," Pristoleph said.
"And so do you."
Pristoleph took a deep breath and said, "So now you'll tell me to surrender to Marek Rymiit. You'll advise that I gift this city to a Thayan invader to sell on the cheap to his Red Wizards back home?"
Wenefir sighed, and Pristoleph could tell the priest didn't have to fake the exhaustion written so plainly on his face. "Hear their demands—the senate's demands, not the Thayan's."
"Why?"
"The city burns," Wenefir said. "It's the ransar responsibility to keep Innarlith safe, not to watch it burn from atop a tower."
Pristoleph's eyes smoldered at that, and he could see Wenefir struggle not to turn and run.
"Surely you haven't climbed all this way," Wenefir went on, sweating, "from the middens where we first met to the fortune and power you've amassed, simply to let it burn around you. Not for the sake of a canal, and certainly not for the sake of one man."
Pristoleph sighed and said, "And still you don't understand. You of all

people should, Wenefir. Nothing worth doing is done for the sake of or by anyone but one man. It is men, it is their will alone, that shapes our world."
"There are gods," Wenefir argued, "who would disagree."
"Men," Pristoleph replied, "by any other name."
The priest bristled but held his tongue.
"Your message has been delivered," Pristoleph said, turning his back on the priest to stare down at the angry fires below. "Good day."
The wemics edged closer, but Wenefir didn't wait for them to take him by the arms. He turned on his heel and walked down the stairs, the wemic guards close behind. When their footsteps faded away, Second Chief Gahrzig stepped closer.
"Is it wise, Ransar," said the wemic, "to let him go?"
"No," Pristoleph said. "No, it isn't. But let him go anyway. No matter what he does, that man will not die by my hand."
65_
20Mirtul, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR) The Chamber of Law and Civility, Innarlith
I think we can all agree that the present ransar'has brought all of this on himself," Senator Asheru said, his voice clipped and hollow, resonating in his chest as though he shouted up from the bottom of a deep well. "Worse, that he brought this on us all."
Marek Rymiit nodded along with the other small group of senators gathered in one of the many private parlors in the labyrinthine cellars of the Chamber of Law and Civility. Warded against magical eavesdropping and arcane forms of egress, the room was meant to be a safe place for committees and quorums to gather and discuss the business of the city-state. The parlor in which Marek sat had become something of a war room.
"Senator Asheru is of course correct," Sitre agreed. Her voice had grown deep and rough with age, and her hands, lined with veins, showed brown spots. Her once beautiful face, though still handsome, was deeply lined, her skin
gone thin and pale. "Can he not see the damage this standoff is wreaking on his own city?"
Asheru harrumphed and said, "Apparently not."
Marek smiled at Asheru and considered the senator. A middle-aged man with long black hair he certainly dyed to mask the gray, his gray-green eyes shone with intelligence and perhaps a spell or two that allowed him to see in ways that mundane humans could not. Asheru had been, before the Thayan Enclave had come to Innarlith, the head of an underground college of wizards, and the chief supplier of spell components, scrolls, and other arcane paraphernalia. The speed with which he abandoned all that to Marek, for a few new spells and a seat

on some senate committee he'd had his eyes on, still boggled the Thayan's mind.
"Though it falls well outside my purview as Ambassador from the Court of Cormyr," Tia Harriman interjected, "I must say I agree with you both." The Cormyrean ambassador still wore her hair tinted a garish shade of purple that only made her pale skin, as old and as weathered as Sitre's, less attractive. "For my part, and on behalf of Their Majesties, King Azoun the Fifth and the Steel Regent, I wished only to see the canal completed. Should it have employed some teleportation magic was not relevant. That it was destroyed, is."
The fact that Marek bribed her with magic that was making her younger by the day, and Meykhati provided a stipend of gold that more than tripled what her king paid his ambassadors had something to do with her being there as well.
Alas, Marek thought, at least one Cormyrean can be bought outright.
Meykhati poured himself another glass of wine and shook his head, clicking his tongue in time with the gesture, then said, "It will cost plenty to rebuild the city. One of my own storehouses on the quayside burns even as we speak, and it is loaded from floor to ceiling with Tethyrian grain."
"We have all suffered losses," Nyla said, her teeth clenched in rage.
"And all that work," Aikiko complained. "All that time."
Marek offered a smile and a calming gesture to them all and said, "My friends, please. We have been over this too many times already. The city burns because one man, Ransar Pristoleph, holds one other man, Ivar Devorast, above not only the senate, but above all the people of Innarlith—nay, the city-state herself."
"That much we know," Meykhati interjected. "But how to bring him down? That's what we must decide, once and for all."
"Bring him down?" Marek asked, not letting his anger at the interruption show. "Or bring him back into the fold?"
"He's brought those bestial barbarians into the city to kill good Innarlans," Nyla argued. "That alone should have him marched to the gallows."
Sitre and Meykhati nodded their agreement, but Asheru and Aikiko looked to Marek for their lead.
"The city burns," said the Thayan, "but it still stands. This building, protected by my magic and others'—" and he paused to nod at Asheru, who beamed in response—"still stands, and will continue to stand. The city walls hold firm, and no outside eneniy lays siege or otherwise appears to be taking advantage of Innarlith's moment of weakness."
No other realm but Thay, Marek silently reminded himself. "There have been fires and isolated looting, but most of us are safe in the Second Quarter. The reserves of food, gold, and magic hold firm, and

remain largely in our hands. Buildings can be rebuilt, and if history has taught us anything it's that peasants breed. The Fourth Quarter slums will be shoulder to shoulder with human refuse again soon enough."
"If," said Meykhati, "we stop it from getting any worse."
"But Pristoleph won't even come down from his tower to speak with us," Aikiko said.
"And his fortress is as secure as ours," Asheru reminded them. It had been Asheru who had provided much of Pristal Towers's magical defenses, before Marek had arrived in Innarlith, and though he knew the secrets of many of them, they all know that there were more—more than either Asheru or Marek could defeat. "Sbmehow, he must be smoked out."
"Perhaps a poor choice of words," Meykhati said, "but I agree with the spirit of it. We must increase the pressure on him, even lay siege to that bloody palace of his. We must drive his wemics out of the city, and kill Pristoleph. It's time Innarlith had a new ransar."
"And that ransar should be Master Rymiit," Aikiko said.
Though he tried, Meykhati couldn't quite avoid the scowl he shot at her before he set his surprise aside. He didn't look Marek in the eye, but they both knew who Meykhati imagined the next ransar to be.
"I second that," Asheru said.
The others looked at each other, sipped their wine, picked at the seams of their clothing, and otherwise avoided speaking up.
"I set that aside," Marek said. "I came here from my faraway home to trade, not to establish myself as your master. I serve the people of Innarlith by serving the interests of your fellow travelers in Thay."
"Well put, Master Rymiit," Meykhati said and they exchanged a look deep in meaning.
Marek knew then that Meykhati would never brook a foreigner as ransar. The Thayan thought it fortunate indeed—for Meykhati—that he hadn't lied when he said he didn't want to be ransar. It didn't pay.
"We have the votes in the senate to simply make that happen," Asheru said. "If not Master Rymiit then some other—any other, but Pristoleph. We can name our new ransar, and Pristoleph will be nothing more than the outlaw he's proven himself to be."
"That may not be necessary," Marek said before Meykhati could volunteer for the position of usurper. "For the good of the city-state we must all reach an accord. Pristoleph must be given one more chance to hear the pleas of his people."
"If he hasn't heard us yet," Meykhati challenged, "what could change that?"
"A new messenger, perhaps," said the Thayan. "Wenefir?"
There sounded a low hum, and a smear of dark indigo light billowed

into the air on the other side of the room, startling all of them but Marek.
"What is the meaning of this?" Meykhati asked no one in particular.
"Th-this isn't supposed to... to..." Aikiko stammered as the cloud of light formed a doorway in the thin air. "You're not supposed to be able to do that here. Not in this room."
Wenefir stepped out of the light and onto the richly carpeted floor, and the magical doorway closed behind him.
"This is highly irregular," Meykhati protested, his face turning red.
"Senators," Marek said with a shallow bow, "and Ambassador, may I present to you Wenefir, former Seneschal of Pristal Towers."
The priest returned Marek's bow and said, "I come to serve."
66_
3Kythorn, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR) Pristal Towers, Innarlith
Wenefir has come to talk," Pristoleph told Gahrzig, "not to kill me."
The embattled ransar looked at his old friend, who nodded in agreement, then back to the wemic, who was rather less convinced.
"If you wish it, I will leave," said the wemic, his smoldering gaze locked on Wenefir, "but I would rather—"
"Go," Pristoleph said, then held up a hand to calm the barbarian chieftain. "Thank you, my friend, but I will be all right."
Pristoleph was happy to see that Wenefir had retained enough wisdom to remain silent, even if that wisdom had failed him of late in terms of choosing his allies.
When the wemic backed out of the room and closed the door, Pristoleph turned and waved Wenefir to one of the two overstuffed armchairs that had been pushed close to the fire. Though it was a warm summer day, Pristoleph wanted the fireplace stacked high with hot-burning wood. Wenefir knew well his ability, inherited from his mysterious father, when it came to fire. If Wenefir sat as close to the hearth as he, Pristoleph could immolate the priest at will.
Though Pristoleph had known Wenefir long enough to see that the priest was rather less than comfortable with the arrangement, much less the heat, he played the dutiful guest and sat before the fire.
"You have come here with a message," Pristoleph said as he lowered himself into the chair facing Wenefir. "Speak."
Wenefir worked to suppress a smile that made Pristoleph seethe. The smile disappeared when the fire blazed bright and hot, and the priest blinked and edged away from it in his seat.
"Anyone else would have run," Pristoleph said, offering his old friend a smile and willing the fire back to its normal state.
Wenefir seemed unsure as to whether to nod or shake his head. "You have nothing to fear from me, Pristoleph, and I have nothing to fear

from you."
"We'll see if that still holds true after you've delivered your message," Pristoleph said with a tilt of one eyebrow.
Wenefir cleared his throat and said, "As a neutral third party, representing only the Temple of the Delicate Chaos, I have been asked to inform you that the senate intends to meet on the morrow to rescind your charter as ransar and
bestow the title to another, with all rights and privileges of the office, thereby putting a stop to the civil unrest that has brought the city-state to her knees."
Pristoleph smiled, though he wanted to scream. He nodded, though he wanted to lash out. The fire burned just a little hotter, though he wanted flames to fill the room.
He knew what Wenefir had meant by "all rights and privileges." Whomever they chose to replace him would command the black firedrakes.
"I can still fight," Pristoleph said.
"The senate hopes that you will step aside," said Wenefir. "For the good of-"
"That's enough," Pristoleph interrupted. "That's enough."
Wenefir pressed his lips together and waited, looking Pristoleph in the eye.
"As a neutral third party...." Pristoleph mused.
"As a friend," Wenefir replied.
"There are hundreds in the city still loyal to me," Pristoleph warned. "And I have the wemics still, and am not without surprises of my own."
"I have been told to tell you that the senate begs you—" he paused for effect—"begs you, Pristoleph, to put an end to this."
"That is their one demand?"
Wenefir nodded in a way that made it clear there would be others.
"I will talk to them," Pristoleph said. "But I will need certain guarantees."
"It would be my honor to convey any message you have back to the senate."
"I want safe passage out of the city for two people, and the wemics," Pristoleph said.
"The barbarians are mercenaries," Wenefir said. "No one will stop them from going home, if they go home in peace."
Something about the way he'd said that curled under Pristoleph's skin.
"And the two?" Wenefir asked. "Yourself and Phyrea?"
"Phyrea and Devorast," Pristoleph said.
Wenefir winced, though he couldn't have been surprised.
"Agreed," the priest said.

Pristoleph let his body sink into the leather chair. He looked as deeply into Wenefir's eyes as he could. "Is that all?" the priest asked. "A neutral third party," Pristoleph repeated. Wenefir smiled.
Pristoleph sat there staring at his old friend sweat for a long moment, wondering if the priest realized he'd been caught negotiating, that he'd agreed to something no "neutral third party" had a right to agree to.
"Safe passage," Pristoleph said again. "The wemics will remain until Phyrea is safe at Berrywilde, and Devorast is on his way to Shou Lung."
Wenefir blinked and nodded. "You have the word of the Senate of Innarlith."
Pristoleph cleared his throat and clenched his teeth together to keep himself from laughing.
"And then everything goes back to normal," Wenefir said.
Pristoleph smiled and allowed a chuckle to bounce out of his throat.
"Yes, well," he said, "the crown weighed heavily on my brow after all."
67_
8Kythorn, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR) The Sisterhood of Pastorals, Innarlith
Iristoleph watched as one of the sisters helped Phyrea into a chair. Her brow narrowed and she blinked, but the grimace, the grunting, and the tears were gone. It hurt her to move, but not as bad.
"You're looking better every time I see you," Pristoleph said.
Phyrea glanced at him, smiled, then turned her attention to the sister, who arranged a napkin on her lap and took the pewter cover off a tray of food. The smell of the steamed vegetables and fish stew reminded Pristoleph that he hadn't eaten himself in—how long? He couldn't even remember. The aroma didn't make him feel hungry, though.
"I want you to leave the city," he said.
Phyrea had been about to dip her spoon into the bowl of stew, but she froze. She didn't look at him, but glanced instead at the sister. The young acolyte shifted uncomfortably, trying with all her will not to look at either the ransar or his wife. Finally, the girl turned and stepped to the door.
"Unless you need anything else... ?" she asked Phyrea, and the way she said it, it was as though she was begging for Phyrea to say "no."
Phyrea obliged the sister, who stepped out and closed the door behind her.
"I want you to go to Berrywilde," Pristoleph said before Phyrea had a chance to speak. "Wait for me there."
"If I ask you why, will you tell me the truth?" she asked, setting her spoon down and folding her shaking hands in her lap.
"Of course I will," he promised.
"Then I won't ask you why," she said. He blinked at that, but let it go.

"I'm still not well."
"Considering the extent of your injuries," Pristoleph replied, "it's Chauntea's own miracle that you can walk, let alone speak and feed yourself. I'll ask the sisters to send acolytes with you to help, and we'll hire a new staff."
Phyrea shook her head and stared down at her plate.
"You're healing quickly," he said. "And it's been ... how long?"
"Forty-six days," Phyrea said, glancing up at him with a flash of reproach.
"Forty-six days," he repeated.
"I know what's been happening in the city," Phyrea said, either looking down at her lap or sitting with her eyes closed—Pristoleph couldn't tell. "The sisters have been keeping me informed. As much as anyone could be in the midst of a bloody civil war."
"I wouldn't go so far as to call it that," Pristoleph said, though that's precisely what it was. "It'll all be over soon."
"Are you going to kill them all?" she asked. "Marek Rymiit, Meykhati, Nyla ... the whole senate? Or are they going to kill you?"
"Neither," he said, "unfortunately."
She looked up at him and the look in her eyes made him so profoundly sad he had to turn his back on her. A lump lodged itself in his throat.
"I don't care if I've failed Innarlith," he said with some difficulty. "I don't even care if I've failed myself—though it makes me a hypocrite of the first order to admit that. But if I thought for a moment that I'd failed you, I'd throw myself in the lake."
"You haven't failed me," she told him.
Pristoleph nodded and, still not looking at her, said, "Your safe passage has been guaranteed. You will go unmolested to Berrywilde while I put an end to all this infighting and stupidity once and for all."
"And if I don't want to go?"
He paused for a long moment because he didn't want to say what he knew he had to say. "I will have you restrained, or sedated, and taken there."
He stood facing the wall, listening to her slow, steady breathing for so long it felt as though days passed with each exhale.
"You may have to do that," she said.
"I only asked one thing of Rymiit and the senate," he said, "and that was a guarantee of safe passage for you and Ivar Devorast. You won't make a liar of me. I'm sorry."
"They'll let Ivar go?" she asked. "Not to Berrywilde...?"
Pristoleph shivered at that. Though the room was warm, he'd never felt so cold. He held his arms crossed in front of his chest and felt his lower lip quiver.

"He'll go to Tsingtao, in Shou Lung, I think," Pristoleph said.
"But he'll live?" she asked. He nodded to the wall.
"Very well, then," Phyrea said. "When do I leave for Berrywilde?"
68_
8Kythorn, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR) The Thayan Enclave, Innarlith
]Marek Rymiit couldn't simply cast a spell and take control of Willem's mind. He knew more than enough about the undead to know that, so he didn't bother preparing that sort of spell. Instead, he wrapped himself in magical defenses on the off chance that the creature broke free of his chains.
Having been created by Marek, though, Willem was inclined to serve the Thayan, and the junior senator's generally weak will when he lived made things easier for the Red Wizard. Still, even Marek hesitated stepping into a room with the feral, hate-driven, walking corpse that Willem Korvan had become.
The door to the dungeon cell creaked open with a shrill sound that gave Marek gooseflesh. He'd had the hinges specifically made to squeak. The whole level, deep below the Thayan Enclave, had been constructed according to Marek's strict instructions, to terrify and intimidate as much as to contain. No one not of Thayan blood even knew they'd dug the dungeons.
The smell was as Marek expected, a cloying mix of exotic spices and rotten flesh. The dim light provided by a single candle an apprentice had lit prior to Marek's descent into the dungeon cast a flickering black shadow
of the restrained creature onto the wall and the ceiling behind him, and the effect was unsettling.
Willem opened his mouth, and Marek was distressed to see that several of the expensive ivory teeth had fallen out. The creature's eyes rolled in their sockets, but quickly fixed on Marek with a cold, empty glare.
The Thayan cleared his throat and said, "Well, my boy. You've looked better."
A hiss escaped Willem's open mouth, but that was his only retort.
"You've been a very bad boy, Willem," Marek went on. "You were told to kill someone, and that someone still lives."
Willem winced and his teeth clacked together hard. Marek reached down and lifted the candle from its simple wrought iron holder. The undead thing flinched away. The sound of its chains shifting on the stone floor was loud enough to make Marek flinch himself.
"You were not created to fail," Marek said. "Others have failed—too many others. Though it benefited me that he live in fear of his life for a while, that he question who it was who wanted him dead and why,

this Cormyrean has troubled me enough. It is time to be rid of him and his ambitious dreams so the city-state can move past this mess."
Willem's eyes held to the candle flame, though Marek knew he was listening.
"If I release you into the night, will you kill him?" Marek asked.
Willem didn't respond at first, so the Thayan waved the candle closer to his face. The creature jerked back with an even louder jangle of chains. He growled from deep in his throat.
"Yes or no," the Red Wizard pressed. "Will you kill Ivar Devorast? I know you can answer. I made you to answer. Answer."
"Yes," the creature croaked, his eyes rolling slowly to Marek's face then back to the candle.
Marek smiled and stepped back, but Willem didn't relax.
"Ivar Devorast has been given safe passage out of the city," Marek said. "He'll be leaving this very night. Though we've been told he's going into some sort of self-imposed exile in Shou Lung, I know that he will go back to the blasted remains of that ludicrous canal of his at least once more."
Willem grunted and said, "Ivar."
Marek paused, not certain what to make of that, then pressed on. "Follow him out of the city. When he's clear of the walls, kill him. Hurt him in the process if you like. I don't care. Leave his body where it will be found, but not found quickly."
Willem opened his mouth and jerked his arm with a clank of chains, but Marek didn't know what that might signify.
"Do you understand those instructions?" the Thayan asked.
"Yes," the undead creature hissed, and his head bobbed in something like a nod.
"Do you hate him still, Willem?" the Red Wizard had to ask.
The creature shuddered and the smell in the room grew stronger, more pungent. Marek had to hold a hand to his nose, but it didn't help.
"Hate," Willem rasped. "Devorast."
Though he was far from satisfied with that answer, Marek moved on.
"There is something else we must discuss," he said.
The creature shuffled his feet and said, "Release me."
"Anxious?"
"Release me," the creature rasped again.
Marek replaced the candle in its holder and reached into a pocket of his robe. He drew a long-bladed dagger and slid it from its sheath. The gold-chased steel blade flashed in the candlelight.
"It's been a long, long time since I've stabbed someone," Marek said, eyeing the blade.
The undead creature lurched forward and snapped his jaws at the Red

Wizard, who met it with the dagger. The blade bit deeply into Willem's desiccated cheek, and when it met the undead flesh it crackled with green and yellow sparks.
Willem howled like a wounded animal and fell backward. With a deafening clatter of chains he fetched up against the wall behind him. He almost fell but managed to get his feet under him. Willem stood, his back scraping against the stone, his humorless eyes following the Red Wizard's dagger.
"Do you have any other demands, my boy?" Marek asked.
He paused, but the creature offered no argument. The wound in his cheek was part cut and part burn. Marek wasn't sure if his creation could feel pain, but he knew that Willem knew that Marek could kill him with that dagger, and that was enough.
"When Devorast is dead," Marek went on, "you will have another to kill, as quickly afterward as possible."
Still the creature stood and waited, and Marek couldn't really be sure Willem heard a word he said.
"Devorast is not the only one who has been granted safe passage out of the city," Marek said.
69____
8Kythorn, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR) The Thayan Enclave, Innarlith
It's up there, the man with the scar on his face told Phyrea. lean sense it. lean feel it. Like an itch.
Her lips parted, but she didn't even draw in a breath to speak. She wanted to ask the ghost if it was that sword, the flamberge, that had killed him, that had made him what
he was. But she knew better than to make any noise—even the faintest whisper.
It was, the man answered anyway, and a cold chill shook Phyrea. You knew that.
She stood in the shadow of a bluetop tree, its leaves rustling in the warm summer breeze. The night was dark, a high overcast blocking the moon and stars. The streets of the Second Quarter were lit only well enough to confer a false sense of security to the residents, but not brightly enough to disturb their slumber—or their illicit comings and goings.
Above her rose the imposing stone wall of what used to be Marek Rymiit's house. No one in the city seemed to notice the moment—even the month—that it stopped being another palatial Second Quarter townhouse and had become one corner of a walled enclave, a little piece of the realm of Thay in the heart of Innarlith.
Wait, the little boy whispered into her head.
Phyrea leaned back into the deeper shadow of the tree and didn't

make a sound. Footsteps approached and faded without pause. She couldn't see who'd passed, but it didn't matter. It was the people on the inside of the enclave she had to worry about.
Are you certain you can climb that1? the sad woman asked, and Phyrea's lips twisted into a smirk.
It's all right, the little boy whispered.
Go, said the man with the scar.
Phyrea crossed from the tree to the wall in three long strides. Her fingers played at the spaces between stones, finding holds all on their own. When she lifted herself up, the tips of her fingers went slightly numb, but otherwise gave no argument. Her toes, protected only by shoes of soft, thin leather that most people would call "slippers," helped her toes cling to spaces too small for them to properly fit into.
And here, the old woman said from somewhere close by, as though she too climbed the wall next to Phyrea, you said you were too sick to travel.
Phyrea didn't answer, keeping her attention fixed on the wall—a crack big enough for two fingers, a mislaid brick that served as a ledge for one toe. She had told Pristoleph that she still felt the effects of her injuries, that she had trouble walking even. But that was a lie. The sisters had done Chauntea's work, and done it well.
"Never felt better," she whispered into the rough stones, her voice so quiet the breeze snatched it away even as it passed her lips.
Pause, if you can, the man with the scar advised, under the windowsill.
Is someone there? she asked without speaking.
I'm there, the little girl answered. I'll tell you when it's safe.
Phyrea let her doubts jab out of her mind. She wanted all of the ghosts to know that she didn't trust the little girl—as if she trusted any of them.
I'm here, too, the man with the scar assured her.
Phyrea reached the window, and paused as the apparitions advised. She heard sounds echo from the tall, thin, arch-topped window—someone moving around inside.
Wait, the little boy whispered.
Phyrea looked down at the uppermost branches of the bluetop, twenty feet below her, and there was another ten or even fifteen feet to the ground. She held herself to the wall with one toe of her left foot, the leather sole of her right foot, two fingers of her left hand, and three on her right. The breeze ruffled her hair, which she'd tied back out of her face. The leather pants and tunic she wore had been oiled so they wouldn't creak, and her short sword was strapped tight to her back so it wouldn't bounce and clank when she moved.
Her left hand began to shake.

Just one moment, the man with the scar promised.
Phyrea couldn't hear anything.
Now, the little girl said, the word accompanied by the feeling of a sneer.
Phyrea waited, even though her right foot began to slip.
Come in, the man with the scar said, and Phyrea reached up with her right hand and took hold of the wooden windowsill. The heavy leaded glass was hinged like a door and had been left open. Phyrea held the windowsill with both hands and pulled up so that her eyes just peeked over the sill. She let both her feet hang, but not dangle.
The room was dark, and the lack of moonlight didn't help. For all Phyrea knew she could have been staring at a dozen battle-ready Red Wizards, standing staring at her in the darkness.
There's no one here, the man with the scar said, and he faded into view. He stood, a figure made of violet light, in the center of the room. The light that formed him failed to illuminate his surroundings.
"Are you lying to me?" she whispered.
The ghost shushed her and shook his head.
The ring, the old woman said, and it sounded as though she was behind Phyrea—and perhaps she was, floating thirty feet in the air.
Phyrea closed her eyes for a moment and concentrated on the coolness of the metal band on the ring finger of her right hand. The ring had been a "gift" from Pristoleph—purloined by her many months before. She had used it to take a sort of inventory of Pristal Towers, and since then had never bothered to use it. She couldn't imagine a place with more magic in it than her husband's house.
She opened her eyes and the ghost of the man was gone, but other things glowed with a similar cool, self-contained light. The window she clung to was ringed with yellow, as was a squat chest of drawers. A wide, high feather bed glowed a sickly green, and a similar hue lit a bearskin rug on the floor in the middle of the chamber. A tray had been set out on a little table, and whatever was in the graceful
crystal carafe glowed blue. The sword on the wall was as red as the flames of the Nine Hells.
Don't touch the frame of the window, the man with the scar said.
Phyrea drew in a deep breath and steadied her shaking arms.
"I'm not sure ..." she started to whisper, but stopped herself.
It's yours, the old woman said. It's ours, said the little girl.
You can't let him have it, the sad woman nearly sobbed. Hasn't he taken enough?
Phyrea didn't want to listen to them, but not because she was afraid of their lies—she wasn't, not any more—but because she knew they were right. The f lamberge was hers, and she should never have given it to the Thayan. Phyrea knew she couldn't undo everything—right all the

wrongs she was responsible for—but she could get the sword back and return it to Berrywilde where it belonged.
She flexed her arms and curled her abdomen. Muscles that had only recently been knitted back together by the prayers of the priestesses of Chauntea resisted at first, but quickly enough surrendered to the force of her will. She drew herself up to a handstand, then bent at the waist so her legs stuck out at a right angle, pointing away from the window. She paused like that for a moment, a part of her reveling in the feeling of once again being in complete control of a body that she'd honed, in secret and for all the wrong reasons, into the most insidious weapon' in Innarlith.
Then she jumped.
Tucking tight, she flung herself backward through the window, careful that no part of her touched the frame or the glass. She hit the floor with barely a whisper of leather on wood, sliding her feet out to temper the force of her landing. Phyrea smiled to herself as she stood, facing the window, and she waited.
It's all right, the little boy assured her. She hadn't triggered the trap that had been set on the window. So far, so good.
Don't step on the rug, the man with the scar told her, or sit on the bed.
There must be something really, really interesting in that chest of drawers, said the boy.
Especially the bottom drawer, the girl added.
Phyrea, the magic of her ring continuing to reveal the dweomers that peppered the room, made her way in absolute silence to the wall upon which the sword was hung.
Stop, the little boy said. Don't make a sound.
Phyrea did as she was told, her head tilted to one side, listening. She didn't hear anything for the longest time and was starting to let the ghosts know of her impatience when the first voice echoed into the limits of her hearing. Muffled by walls and distance, she couldn't make out any words, but the volume increased as the voice—no, voices—neared.
"... khazark wants you to know,"one of the voices said— and it sounded as though they were right outside the room, "he'll tell you. Otherwise, remember your place."
The man spoke Mulhorandi, a language Phyrea's father had insisted she be tutored in. She'd never thought she'd have a chance to use it. The common tongue and Chondathan were all she'd really ever needed, but at that moment she silently thanked her father, wherever he was.
"My apologies, Master,"said the other voice—younger, a boy. "Shall I await the khazark here?"
Phyrea wondered who or what a "khazark" was, but wished the boy

wouldn't wait for him—or it—anywhere near the room she was in. She'd promised herself she'd get the flamberge back without killing anyone.
"No," the man said, and Phyrea fought back the urge to sigh in relief. "The khazark may be very late in retiring tonight. There is much to prepare for."
Phyrea didn't like the sound of that, but she did like the sound of their footsteps receding.
Step carefully, the man with the scar advised.
You can take the sword, said the old woman.
Phyrea shook her head slowly. Surely Marek had cast some spell to fasten the weapon to the wall so that no one could remove it without magic equal to or greater than his, or he'd at least trapped it, like he'd done the window and the chest of drawers.
He didn't think anyone would get in here, the little boy said.
Arrogant, said the old woman. Hike that in a man.
Phyrea shivered and reached up for the sword. It lifted easily off its hooks, and the weight of it in her hands was familiar—at once comforting and disquieting. Nothing exploded or leaped out at her.
Go out the way you came, the man with the scar said.
"Thank you," Phyrea whispered into the darkness.
The man with the scar on his face materialized just long enough to smile at her. Phyrea had to stand there for a moment to calm her shaking—a spasm that made her whole body quiver—then she went back out the window.
70_
lOKythorn, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR) The Chamber of Law and Civility, Innarlith
Wenefir knew precisely where he stood. It had all been explained to him by Marek Rymiit. Should Pristoleph acquiesce to the senate's demands and peacefully step down, the Temple of the Delicate Chaos would be allowed to come up from underground. Wenefir would not just be allowed, but would be assisted, in spreading the word of the Mad God to the people of Innarlith. Worship of Cyric would finally come out into the open, and Wenefir was confident that, given that chance, Cyric's word would take
hold of the city and never release it. Ransar? What would that be compared to the spiritual leader of thousands of souls enslaved to the whims of the Prince of Lies?
He walked into the senate chamber alongside Pristoleph. Wenefir could feel the heat radiating from his old friend. Though his face was impassive, impossibly calm in the face of a senate that had come to hate him so deeply they were willing to plunge their own city into civil war, the heat revealed his simmering anger, a rage that literally

boiled just below his placid exterior.
Those senators who had had the courage or ambition to attend the session seemed to feel it, too, though none of them came close enough to Pristoleph to feel the heat. Only a very few of them even tried to look Pristoleph in the eye, and most of those who tried, failed to hold the ransar's powerful gaze.
Pristoleph didn't even spare a glance in the direction of the black firedrakes. The creatures that used to be his most trusted bodyguards lined the walls of the chamber, hands on long spears and other weapons, and dark passion in their eyes. Wenefir recognized a few of them, "men" who had held posts in Pristal Towers, but their murderous eyes betrayed no shred of the loyalty that had once been so resolute.
Wenefir didn't let the presence of the black firedrakes rattle him—he was rattled enough as it was, merely from the dense, hot air of the room. Black firedrakes aside, all he had to do was play his role and wait, and Innarlith would be Cyric's, and by default, his, soon enough.
"Welcome, Pristoleph," Meykhati said from the dais, his omission of the title ransar was neither unexpected nor unnoticed. "You will have the ear of the senate, and you will not be harmed."
Meykhati didn't have to say that. It had all been decided, negotiated, decided again, then renegotiated and settled in the last two days. Pristoleph didn't appear to have heard the senator. Instead, he walked to the dais, stood next to him, and cleared his throat.
The senators in attendance took their seats, all eyes fixed on Pristoleph. They waited to hear a message they had been given in writing in advance, a message penned in part by Marek Rymiit, in part by Meykhati, and in part by Pristoleph. Wenefir knew that if Pristoleph merely spoke those words and walked away, everything would go back to normal, the streets would calm, the wemics would go back to the Shar, and Cyric's Black Sun would rise in Innarlith. Sweat beaded on Wenefir's forehead.
"I come before this assembly for the last time," Pristoleph began—the words taken verbatim from the prepared statement. Wenefir took a deep breath. "i will speak my piece, then I will step down as your ransar."
There was a general murmur in the chamber that made Wenefir cringe. The senators had the nerve to feign surprise.
"But before I go," Pristoleph went on, "there is something that I must say."
Wenefir's head spun. That wasn't part of the statement. Pristoleph was supposed to have begun thanking people who helped him get where he was. Wenefir scanned the huge chamber for Marek but didn't see him. How could the Thayan not be here? Wenefir thought. His own

internal voice had gone shrill with panic. Cold sweat began to soak through his robes and the scar between his legs began to itch.
"Perhaps you wish to reconsider," Meykhati warned Pristoleph. "The senate's patience is voluminous but has its limits. For the sake of peace —"
"To the Abyss with peace," Pristoleph shot back, and Meykhati shrunk away before clearing his throat and puffing out his chest, his eyes darting around the chamber for fear that his colleagues had seen him flinch. "I will speak, and you will listen."
The assembled lawmakers fidgeted and murmured to each other. One of them stood—Aikiko—and turned to march out of the chamber. Pristoleph watched her go, his yellow-hot gaze boring into her back. She stumbled on the
steps at the end of the aisle and turned. Wenefir saw the fear in her eyes and thought, She looks like I feel.
"If any more of you would like to go," Pristoleph said. "You know where the doors are."
That stopped Aikiko in her tracks and she turned, standing at the end of the aisle. She fidgeted, not sure what to do. with her hands, and Pristoleph stared at her for a moment that seemed as endless as it was heavy.
"In the long history of Faerun," Pristoleph said, his eyes finally leaving Aikiko to bounce around the senate chamber, "change has come in many forms, both good and bad. Empires have risen and fallen, whole races have emerged only to be washed from the face of Toril, and even the gods have tread the land upon which we stand this very day —and even they died like the mortals that bow before them. All of these moments, all of those beginnings and endings, have come at the hands of a man. It wasn't Mystra who brought low the Empire of Netheril, but a single arch-wizard who gave himself the power of a god. And in that spirit, Ivar Devorast came here from Cormyr to change the face of Faerun for all time, to leave a mark upon the very rock and soil, to dig a river where none existed before, to redraw our maps and change everything in the process. Some of you supported that goal. Others of you opposed it. Some of you watched from afar, content to get on with your lives either way. But not one of you—not one of you useless, pointless bureaucrats—recognized the truth of the canal, or of Ivar Devorast, or of me."
Some of the senators looked angry, some appeared cowed, but all of them remained silent. Meykhati's face went red, but he too didn't speak.
"What Ivar Devorast created, and what he subsequently destroyed," Pristoleph went on, "was a work that could only be imagined by one man. He destroyed it because you proved yourselves unworthy of it.

You proved Innarlith unworthy of it. You are servants. You are slaves."
"That's an outrage!" Meykhati shouted. "An outrage!"
Wenefir's knees quivered, and his breath came in shallow gasps. The huge chamber seemed to press in on him from all sides, stifling, suffocating. The priest turned and almost fell. His head spun and his mouth went dry.
"Be silent, fool," Pristoleph said. "You'll get what you want. You'll be ransar. And you'll stay ransar only long enough for the Thayan—a man we should have killed the moment he stepped on Innarlan soil—to choose your successor. Be the lead sheep, if you like. The herd will be happy with you until they're told not to be."
"Get out!" Meykhati shrieked. "Get out of here before I have you arrested. Get out of here before I kill you myself!"
Wenefir glanced back to see Pristoleph and Meykhati seem to teeter for the blink of an eye, then move toward each other as one. Candles flared into great plumes of white-hot flame and one of the chandeliers that hung from the high ceiling began to quiver. The senators stood, and someone shouted, but Wenefir ignored it all, brushing aside a page who was fleeing the room.
Wenefir burst into the outer chamber and ran. His legs burned and he breathed in gasps. He would be blamed. He would be blamed for all of it. Pristoleph had destroyed himself when he defied the order, the arrangement, and he'd taken Wenefir with him.
The priest burst through the doors, startling the pair of black firedrakes that stood guard. They almost stopped him, but stepped aside when they recognized the priest. Outside, there was a short colonnade. Rain fell and mixed with the sweat that had soaked into his robe. He stepped aside to avoid someone who was just as startled as he, and he slipped. Mud splattered, he stood and started to run again, losing his way and ending up in the gardens that surrounded the imposing edifice of the Chamber of Law and Civility.
"Wenefir," a voice boomed amid the patter of rain. The sound of it stopped the priest cold.
"Marek—" Wenefir gasped. "Pristoleph—"
"Come here, Wenefir," Marek Rymiit said, beckoning him to a narrow path that led into a copse of trees. "It will be all right. Pristoleph's fate is sealed."
Wenefir followed the wizard because he wasn't sure what else to do.
"He lied," Wenefir mumbled. "It's degenerated into a brawl."
"I know," said the Thayan.
"What do we do?"
"We?" the Red Wizard asked.
"Yes, I-"
Wenefir might have finished that thought had a bolt of lightning not

crashed down from the roiling gray clouds to hold him for an agonizing moment in its death grip.
He fell to the ground afire, smelling his own flesh burning, choking on the smoke and heat that blistered his lungs.
"We shall do nothing, priest," Marek said, his voice almost lost to Wenefir amid the crackling of flames.
Marek Rymiit laughed while Wenefir burned to death.
71_
lOKythorn, the Yearof Lightning Storms (1374 DR) The Canal Site
There was just enough left of Willem Korvan's mind to make his undead body quiver at the sight of Ivar Devorast.
The man that had been his friend, became his enemy, then ended as his prey, stood straight and tall against the driving rain. A piercing blast of lightning split the sky and illuminated the devastated remains of the canal. Devorast stood in silhouette against the jumble of broken stone and shattered wood. Willem opened his mouth, ignoring the rain that pelted his face. He shivered, but not because the rain was cold. His body moved in response to fell magic—a curse, really—that had saturated his desiccated form with the semblance of life. Sometimes that magic
tipped out of balance and he shook. Sometimes his mouth fell open. Sometimes he gurgled. Sometimes he lost control of his eyes. And sometimes he screamed.
The loud rumble of thunder masked the scream at first, but when the thunder echoed away, the hoarse cry remained.
Devorast spun, blinking his wet hair from his eyes, and Willem leaped. He'd crawled up on Devorast from behind and was poised on all fours on a tilted block of stone that seemed to have been tossed up by the hand of some enormous giant from where it had once served as part of the canal's wall. The stone was at once rough and slick. Willem ignored—didn't even register, really—the pain of scraping several layers of skin from his knee, hip, and palms when he leaped. The skin, all of it, was dead anyway.
Devorast grunted, not in panic or fear, but from simple exertion, as he jumped to the side to avoid Willem. The undead creature didn't try to turn in the air. He didn't have that degree of control over his own body, and in the primal part of his mind that Marek Rymiit had made most dominant, Willem knew he didn't have to.
They were alone. No living soul within miles would hear Devorast's last words—if Willem allowed him any. No one was there to help. No one would stand in Willem's way at the last moment. And any ability to change his mind, to decide for himself simply not to kill the man who once shared his roof and his dreams, had been drained from Willem Korvan once and for all.

"Who are you?" Devorast shouted into the pounding rain.
Willem fetched up on the muddy ground in a crouch and grimaced at his prey. Another of his teeth fell out to clatter against his tongue, which sat in his lower jaw like a stone. Devorast's eyes narrowed and he stepped back.
"What are—?" he started, but then shook his head. "Willem?"
Willem lunged, his hands out in front of him. He meant to grab Devorast by his filthy red hair and drag him down
to the mud. He meant to rip the man's head off. He wanted to taste Devorast's blood, to gouge out his eyes, to rip his spleen from his still-warm guts.
But something stopped him in mid-air with the force of a battering ram. He'd only barely registered a glow in the air like some sort of phosphorescent mist.
If he'd had any air in his lungs it would have been driven from him by the impact of his chest, but instead he simply flew backward through the air, whirling in the driving rain. He hit the ground in a rolling confusion of limbs and scattered stones, but was quickly back on his feet.
He screeched a hollow, atonal battle-cry across the dark distance between him and Devorast, but the human didn't stand and fight. Instead, he turned and jumped. It was a jump no human should have been capable of—both too high and too far. He landed with uncertain footing on a tall pile of broken stone blocks, and turned to look back at Willem.
Willem began to close the distance between them in whatever rough approximation of running he was capable of. His feet slipped in the mud and he staggered and grunted. Devorast stood high on the mound, watching him.
"Willem, is that you?" the human shouted over the rumble of thunder and the drumming of the rain. "Willem? What's happened to you? What have you become?"
"What do you care?" Willem coughed out, then repeated it in a feral, shrieking wail. He hadn't willed himself to speak, and when he tried again his brain wouldn't send words to his mouth. He lumbered toward Devorast, toward the man he was created to kill.
"Willem," Devorast called. "Do you understand me?"
But Willem Korvan staggered on, his mouth open, his eyes rolling in his skull. The cold and the pain and every hideous sensation that came from his withering, deteriorating, rotting body tore through him. But instead of stopping him or slowing him even, it was the pain and the misery that drove him on.
He clambered up the side of the mound and Devorast looked down at him. It was too dark for Willem to see his face, and the undead thing

he'd become wouldn't have recognized anything but fear in Devorast's expression. And that was the one thing that, even in his crumbling state, Willem knew he would never see. Devorast might pity him, hate him, or be disgusted by him. He might be disappointed. But he would never be afraid.

"Willem, stop," Devorast said, not having to yell so loudly, with Willem only a few feet beneath him.

Maybe that was pity in his voice. Maybe he was disappointed.

Willem let loose a rattling, throat-shredding scream and grabbed a piece of broken wooden brace that protruded from the pile of rubble. With a strength granted him by the Red Wizard's necromancy, Willem yanked the board free of the pile. The rocks on which Devorast stood shifted then fell, toppling the human off. He fell backward, arms pinwheeling, and disappeared from sight over the other side of the mound.

Willem scrambled to the top, the board hanging from his open hand by a long, thick sliver of wood that had come loose and impaled him through the palm of his hand. When he tried to use that hand to climb with, the splinter broke and the board fell free, but wood stayed in his hand.

He didn't care.

Once atop the mound of rubble, Willem looked down. Devorast lay on his back, his chest heaving, his mouth open wide. He struggled to breathe and to sit up. Willem hissed and leaped from the top of the mound.

Devorast coughed then sputtered something, the sound of his voice lost to another crash of thunder. Rainwater and spittle few from the man's lips.

Willem was stopped once more in midair. The force of the glowing mist—mist in the shape of the head of a ram, its curved horns traced with shimmering luminescence-tipped him up and drove him into the mound. He hit hard,

and some combination of bones snapped. Willem screamed out of some half-buried instinct, though the pain was no worse than always.

He slid to the muddy ground in front of Ivar Devorast, who scurried away from him, still not able to stand, and still desperately gasping for a decent breath. Willem rose to his feet and took a step toward Devorast. The human spat out a word, the same word that had conjured the spectral ram, and Willem steeled himself for another blow, but it didn't come.

Something passed through Devorast's gaze that might have been fear —might have been. Or was he simply annoyed? He held a hand to his face, a ring gleaming on one finger, and spoke the word again, but again the magic did not appear. He was left scrambling away on his

back, gasping for breath and helpless.
72_
lOKythorn, the Yearof Lightning Storms (1374 DR)
The Canal Site
H e isn't there! the sad woman screamed, the "sound" echoing in Phyrea's head and setting her teeth on edge. He doesn't love you. He'll use you. He'll ruin you. He'll kill you. He'll bleed you dry.
They all do, the old woman said. Turn, girl. Turn away.
Let her go, the little girl squealed. Let her die by his hand, or the creature's. Let her die and come with us that way. Let her join us covered in mud.
No, the man with the scar on his face warned. She must die at Berrywilde.
Phyrea screamed into the blast of thunder and kicked her horse forward. The animal stumbled on the loose rocks and started at a flash of lightning. She forced the horse's head down and screamed again, anger flooding through her, washing away all the fear and doubt.
The flamberge bounced against the saddle horn, clattering in its scabbard. She grabbed it and steadied it as the horse calmed—at least calmed enough for her to urge it deeper into the ruin of the canal.
"What creature?" she screamed into the night, then half-screamed, half-grunted when a ghost appeared in front of her. She pulled her horse around the ghost of the old woman.
Go home, girl, the withered old crone wheezed, there's nothing for you here.
Phyrea shook her head and let a frustrated growl rumble from her throat. As she passed, the old woman's face changed. Phyrea had to turn in her saddle to see it, and she blinked in the cold, driving rain. The old woman's face twisted into a hideous, monstrous mask like the face of a demon, all fangs and open, worm-ridden sores.
Phyrea yanked her eyes off the horrifying visage and urged her horse into the storm. She didn't know where she was going.
"Where are you?" she howled into the night. Her body shook with a sob that almost knocked her from the saddle. She began to weep. "Where are you?"
Show her, said the man with the scar on his face.
Phyrea pulled her horse up short. The beast was only too happy to oblige. Fear made it quiver under her. It kept its head down, scanning what it could see of the ground in the lightning-punctuated darkness. It shifted, desperate for footing in the mud and loose stones.
"Show me," Phyrea sobbed.
But if she dies here___the little boy said. If Willem
touches her....
Willem? Phyrea thought.

She saw the boy standing at the top of a hill made of the sundered remains of the canal. His missing arm had been replaced by a ghastly tentacle that waved and curled with an intelligence all his own. The violet light was tinged with green. His face was locked in a rigid death mask—a silent' scream of incalculable agony.
Phyrea sobbed again, "Show me. Help me."
Show her, said the man with the scar on his—no, Phyrea realized. His "voice" was different.
She dug her heels into her horse's flanks and drove it toward the hideous phantasm of the little boy. The mount fetched up near the base of the mound and pulled around to the left. Phyrea held on for dear life, almost sliding off—then she hopped back straight onto the saddle, flinching away from the ghostly tentacle. The little boy had disappeared only to reappear in the air right next to her.
Phyrea's attention was drawn up to the sky above her. The ghosts whirled in the air, their arms and legs flailing as though they were falling, but they spun in circles-opposing orbits that intersected with each other so that Phyrea winced several times in the space of a few heartbeats, certain that two or more of them would collide.
They had all changed—their mouths lined with fangs, their eyes bulging and distorted. Hands shrank to feeble claws or grew to swollen, diseased proportions.
There, the new voice said.
Phyrea's head turned of its own accord, as though gently nudged that way. Lightning flashed and she saw a man scrambling through the mud on his back, and another figure stalking up to him, murder coming off him in waves.
"Ivar," she gasped.
The sword... the voice whispered.
Phyrea screamed, "Ivar!" and jammed her heels into the horse's flanks, whipping its neck with the reins.

10 Ky thorn, the Yearof Lightning Storms (1374 DR) Third Quarter, Innarlith
Despite the presence of the black firedrakes, fighting his way out of the senate chamber had been the easy part.
Obviously ordered not to injure any of the senators, who ran through the chamber like flocks of panicked birds, the black firedrakes didn't spit their streams of deadly acid at him—until he finally burst into the outer chamber.
Pristoleph had been burned in spots and it hurt, but he pressed on. The wemics he'd had lying in wait, surrounding the Chamber of Law and Civility, engaged the black firedrakes, cutting open a path out of the building.

Expecting trouble, perhaps, the city watch had cordoned off the streets for a few blocks around the senate seat. The streets were clear of innocent bystanders when the black firedrakes met the wemics and blood filled the middens.

Spells flared as Marek Rymiit's wizards took to the streets. Wemics were burned or frozen where they stood, "some just disappeared in flashes of green and yellow light, or puffs of vile-smelling smoke.

Pristoleph burned his share of Red Wizards and black firedrakes as he made his way out of the cordoned area. The wemics pulled him along in a ring of fierce, barbaric warriors. Their weapons spilled blood and batted back spears. Acid burned them, only to be cooled by a splash of an enemy's blood.

The watchmen at the edges of the safe area stepped aside when they passed, not even looking Pristoleph or any of the wemics in the eye. They didn't seem to know or care who would be the victor that day, who would end up with the city-state in his grasp, so they had apparently decided not to anger either side. Most of them simply went home or holed up in a tavern or festhall. Many of them stayed at their posts, watching with a mix of horror and fascination. None of them fought.

The sun had already set by the time Pristoleph made his way out of the Chamber of Law and Civility, and though the black firedrakes made full use of the dark streets of the Second Quarter, in the Third Quarter, where the tradesmen lit their streets with lamps, Pristoleph started burning them.

The black firedrakes abandoned their human guises to swoop in at Pristoleph from the rooftops. The genasi turned his attention to the street lamps, shattering the glass with sudden bursts of heat and sending thin columns of white-hot flame lancing into the sky. The fire cut through one of the firedrake's wings like a hot knife through butter, and the creature spiraled to a spine-shattering stop in front of a cabinetmaker's workshop.

The wemics were as afraid of the fire as the drakes, and were further confused by the tradesmen and their customers scurrying through the nighttime streets, all wondering what manner of inhuman war had suddenly fallen upon them. Rain pelted the ground, making burned firedrakes sizzle on the streets. In the far distance, well to the northwest, lightning flickered on the horizon, and even over the din of the running battle, Pristoleph could hear the distant rumble of faraway thunder.

Pristoleph stopped, his back against the wall of a tannery, and scanned the confusion for Second Chief Gahrzig. He spotted the wemic, his arm cleared of fur, an angry acid burn still sending tendrils of pungent smoke into the air. The mercenary impaled a twitching

black firedrake to the gravel street. The polearm he used to kill the firedrake was one Pristoleph had purchased from the Thayan himself. The sight made Pristoleph smile.
"Gahrzig!" he called, shouting over the dying scream of another black firedrake, and the agonized bellow of another burned wemic. "Second Chief—to me!"
The wemic yanked his weapon free of the quivering firedrake, which fell still when the blade came out of it with a gout of blood and a trail of slippery yellow-gray guts. The wemic, its claws kicking up gravel, dodged a falling firedrake as he made his way to the ransar's side. Behind him, the fallen drake was ripped apart by two of Gahrzig's tribemates, who swallowed the pieces they'd torn out with their vicious fangs.
"Make your stand here," Pristoleph said. "I will find you again at Pristal Towers."
"We will go together," the wemic argued. "The plan was to-"
"No, my friend," Pristoleph interrupted. "No. It has to be this way. Protect my house."
"Where will you go?" the wemic asked.
Pristoleph smiled and shook his head, and the wemic returned his smile, his fangs glistening in the wild firelight. A black firedrake screamed as it was torn to shreds behind him.
Gahrzig turned back to the fight just in time to avoid a spray of acid from the roof above—and the spray was answered by a volley of arrows that burned with a magical blue-green light, fired from a wemic on the other side of the street.
Pristoleph disappeared into the shadows of an alley that would take him away from Pristal Towers. He had more than one route in mind, and though it had been some time since he'd lived on the streets, he still knew Innarlith. He made his way as fast as he could to the Fourth Quarter, back to the streets from whence he came.
74_;_
lOKythorn, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR) The Canal Site
When the horse smashed into the twisted, freakish thing that once was Willem Korvan, Phyrea flew from the saddle, screaming. The horse went down, puffing out the air from both lungs. Willem was tossed underneath it, raking at the beast's flanks as it slid over him, pushing him into the mud and driving shards of broken stone into his sandpaper skin.
Phyrea hit the ground hard but rolled with it, throwing one arm out to slow her fall then tucking it close to her side with the other as she rolled to a muddy, chilling stop on the rain-saturated ground.
The horse kicked and struggled, its sides quivering. Its mouth was open and its lips pulled back over its teeth. A twisted abomination of a

man, which still shared enough of Willem's features that Phyrea had no choice but to accept that it was indeed him, rose from behind it, lit by a flash of lightning.
Phyrea screamed.
Whatever she'd thought of Willem Korvan, and she'd changed her mind about him more than once in the years she'd known him, she'd always found him handsome. But whatever had happened to him to turn him into a vicious, monstrous, blindly violent killer, had disfigured him in ways that brought a tang of bile to the back of her throat.
Phyrea had to look away while Willem killed her horse. The animal didn't have the air in its lungs to scream, but it kicked and rolled as Willem pounded it. The sound of its ribs breaking stung Phyrea's ears. She clasped her palms against the sides of her head, but she could still hear it.
Someone touched her and she screamed and flinched away, striking out, but not hitting anyone.
"Phyrea," Devorast said from right next to her. "Phyrea, it's me."
She tried to say his name, but her throat closed around it.
The sword, the voice said and something made Phyrea turn away from Devorast, even though at that moment she wanted nothing in the world more than just to look at his face.
Another ghostly figure stood in the pouring rain, a few paces from the dying horse. Phyrea blinked at first because she wasn't sure it was really him, then she blinked away tears.
The sword, the ghost of her father said. Our family's sword ...It was the sword that made him this way.
"Phyrea," Devorast said, pulling her to her feet. "What could possibly have brought you here?"
"Father?" Phyrea called, her voice squeaking.
And it's the sword that will put him to rest, said Inthelph.
The man with the scar on his face screamed into Phyrea's head with such a profound rage it made her knees fall out from under her. Devorast held her up, and began to pull her away.
"He'll kill you," she gasped when her head cleared and she saw the ruin of Willem Korvan, her horse's blood washing off him under the relentless downpour, stalking toward them with so single-minded and burning a hatred she felt as though she was going to wither in the face of it. "He'll kill you."
"Run," Devorast urged her—almost begged, if such a one as he could ever have begged. "Go, Phyrea. He's here for me."
He's here for you both, Inthelph said.
Phyrea tore herself from Devorast's arms and he pushed her away. She almost fell, but she slid a little and got her feet under her. Devorast

ran in the opposite direction.
"Here!" he shouted, though Willem gave no indication that he even saw Phyrea. "It's me you want."
Willem opened his mouth and screamed. The sound was like metal scraping on metal. Phyrea's hair stood on end and her breath caught in her chest. She scrambled for the horse.
Hurry, Phyrea, her father urged.
Phyrea fell face-first into the warmth of the horse's spilled blood. She dug into the soft earth with her fingers, clawing away at it, and her hand finally wrapped around something solid.
She heard a sound like a sack of grain dropped from a great height and sobbed. She couldn't see. It was too dark and there were piles of rubble everywhere.
"Ivar!" she screamed into the storm, and pulled back with all her might.
The sword came loose from its scabbard and the undulating blade shone in a flash of lightning.
The ghosts whirled through the air, spinning wildly,
drawing her attention up. It was as though they churned in agony. Their screams rattled in Phyrea's head. She staggered back and fell, sitting in a puddle of water. She shivered, still looking up, blinking against the rain— and another form was flung through the whirling ghosts, passing through two of them.
It was Devorast. Phyrea opened her mouth to scream at the sight of him hurtling through the air. She imagined he'd been thrown by the undead creature, but when he hit the ground, Devorast landed on his feet.
Of course, she remembered. The banelar's ring.
He spun. While Phyrea stood, Devorast took three long strides to stand beside her.
And Willem was there, his ghastly visage lit by a blue-white blast of lightning. The hate and fury she'd seen in his face was gone, though. She couldn't read his expression, his face was too disfigured for that, but something about the way he stood there, the way he looked at them, made her profoundly sad.
The flamberge slipped from her fingers and splashed into the mud. Willem looked down at it, then back up to her. Though it was dark, she could see his eyes—black, desperate pits in his horror of a face.
"I won't," Willem said, his voice grinding and harsh.
He was a good man, Inthelph said, and his voice in her head made Phyrea start to cry. Don't let this go on. Whatever he's done, or whatever he's failed to do, this he doesn't deserve.
Phyrea bent and picked up the sword. Willem's head tilted up with it then turned to Devorast. Phyrea looked at him too and shook her

head.
Devorast took the sword from her hand and Willem lurched forward.
"Willem," Devorast said. "I'm sorry."
Willem stepped forward again and Devorast thrust the flamberge into his withered chest, into the space where his heart once beat.
"No," Willem grunted as Marek Rymut's necromancy unwound inside him. "Don't be sorry. It was my fault. It always was."
Phyrea sobbed and fell to her knees. Willem slid off the blade and crumpled to the rain-soaked mud.
73_
13Flamerule, the Year ofLightning Storms (1374 DR) Third Quarter, Innarlith
Iristoleph stood under a dying tree on a street in the Third Quarter, baking under a deep woolen cowl in the late summer heat. The genasi didn't mind it. He was comfortable, in fact, but what he saw across the street bothered him greatly.
A cooper, a man he knew by reputation as one of the city's finest craftsmen, stood with downcast eyes. His chest—once as big around and as sturdy as the barrels he fashioned— appeared sunken and slack. He watched with dull, beaten eyes as a gang of animated corpses pounded away at tasks that had once been performed by young apprentices, boys in their teens who would one day open workshops of their own, either in Innarlith or in neighboring cities from the Vilhon Reach to the Border Kingdoms. But those apprentices were gone, replaced by Marek Rymut's zombies.
The undead barrel-makers poured water into a barrel they'd finished. It was bad enough that the thing sprung leaks in a dozen places or more, but as they poured the water in, strips of their own rotting flesh fell into the barrel, fouling it. The cooper looked away in disgust, and so did Pristoleph.
He brushed past a man who sat on the street, his hand out, his eyes pleading. Children scurried after a rat, laughing only because they hadn't yet had to come to grips with the fact that they had no future. They would not apprentice to the cooper, nor the baker, nor the chandler,
but would likely grow up as Pristoleph had, struggling for scraps left from the tables of the Second Quarter, fighting every day for any meager existence, fighting just to survive. Stealing. Killing.
He put a hand against the wall of a boarded-up shop, what once was a baker of fine pastries had been forced to close when the undead work gangs brought disease and took the wages of the neighbors so that his steady business trickled to a few silvers here and there. Pristoleph had heard the baker moved his family to Arrabar.
Having gathered himself, his anger suppressed enough so that at least

the heat that poured from him didn't set his clothes on fire, Pristoleph continued on his way past another beggar and another, past another vacant shop and another. At least the tavern was still open. One thing anyone could count on was that when times were hard, men drank. When they had nowhere to go, and nothing to occupy them, they drank a lot.

Though it was still long before highsun, the tavern was crowded—packed to the walls. Pristoleph entered and all conversation came to a sudden halt. More than two hundred sets of eyes turned to him, and he paused in the door to study their faces. Perhaps only one in ten held a flagon of ale, and more than half wore hooded cloaks despite the Summertide heat.

Pristoleph drew the cowl from his head and smiled, his strange hair waving on his head like a roaring campfire. The people gathered in the tavern and the barkeep himself stood a little straighter. Wemics stepped out of the crowd, their snarling smiles giving a few of the assembled pause. Second Chief Gahrzig tipped his maned head and touched the haft of a pole arm to his temple and the other wemics followed suit.

The men who'd come from the ranks of the city watch, and from Firesteap Citadel and the Nagaflow Keep, saluted him as well, smiles splitting their faces, perhaps for the first time in a month.

A woman stepped out of the crowd, her fine features and olive skin marking her as Shou. Her face, as beautiful as it was exotic, was one Pristoleph instantly recognized.

"Greetings, noble Ransar," Ran Ai Yu said and bent at the waist in a deep bow.

Beside her another Shou, a man Pristoleph knew as Lau Cheung Fen, bowed alongside her, his unnaturally long neck swaying with the motion.

"Greetings, Miss Ran," Pristoleph said, "and greetings to you all."

The place remained as silent as a tomb, all eyes on Pristoleph.

"On the eighth day of Eleasias," Pristoleph said, his voice carrying strong and stern to every ear in the room, "Innarlith will live again."

76_

8 Eleasias, the Year ofLightning Storms (1374 BR) The Chamber of Law and Civility, Innarlith

Marek Rymiit stood on the dais of the senate chamber, in the place normally reserved for the ransar. The significance of that was lost on no one, especially Marek himself.

"My dear friends, one and all," Marek shouted over the din of the assembled senators, who quickly began to shush each other and turn their attention to the dais. "Please rise for three of your number, any one of whom would make a fine, steady, and resolute ransar."

Marek then introduced Aikiko, Asheru, and Meykhati to thunderous applause. All three of them held up their hands in conciliatory gestures, calling for quiet even as their gloating smiles and limpid eyes soaked up the admiration of their peers like a spider draws the essential fluids from a doomed fly.

"Thank you, Khazark," Meykhati said, and Marek grinned and bowed, charmed by the senator's use of the Thayan
honorific he'd only recently revealed to the Innarlans. He'd revealed it to Meykhati first, in fact, at the same time he'd cast a spell over the senator that suppressed his willfulness and ambition. "We three stand before you, humbled by the grand traditions of the city-state we love so dearly, our hearts swelled with pride over having rescued Innarlith and her people from the vile clutches of the inhuman Pristoleph."

Another thunderous ovation, but when Marek scanned the faces of the senators, he saw no few scowls among the dead-eyed grins.

"I come here today to deliver a message of a personal nature," Meykhati went on, speaking the words Marek had recited to him that morning. If any of the senators, many of whom had known Meykhati for decades, detected any wavering in his sincerity, none would question it. "With a heavy heart, but a firm dedication to a greater purpose, I formally withdraw my name from your consideration to serve as the next Ransar of Innarlith."

What followed was a dead-pan murmuring no more sincere than Meykhati's statement. The murmurs were replaced by applause when Meykhati bowed to the room and took a largely ceremonial step backward—but he didn't leave the dais.

Aikiko stepped forward even as Meykhati stepped back, and raised her hand, silencing the assembly.

"My fellow senators, hear me," she said. "I stand before you, like Meykhati, reluctant to set myself above any of you. I call for a new way. Let us set aside the post of ransar and let the senate itself hold executive power. Let us lead by consensus, and by the communal will of the aristocracy!"

That was met with applause as well, though many of the senators appeared confused. That made Marek smile. They were afraid of the reality of the power they told each other they already had.

"An idea worth debating further," Asheru called out as the din once more died down. "But I offer another. There is one among us who—though compared with those of us born
and raised within her walls is something of a newcomer to Innarlith—has time and again proven not only his worth but his loyalty. His steadfast determination and progressive ideas have brought a new economy to Innarlith and cowed the rise of a worker's army—or have we forgotten those dark days when foreign agitators appealed to the

baser instincts of the Third Quarter?"
Shouts of "No! No!" and hisses followed, and Marek hid a chuckle with a hand to his mouth. After all, he was the foreign aggitator they so feared.
"There is one man who, I believe, should be granted the post of Ransar of Innarlith, with all the duties and privileges so implied," Asheru went on, "and that man is Marek Rymiit."
Marek didn't flinch at the heartbeat of silence that weighed so heavily over the room before the senators broke into another round of applause. Maybe they knew what was happening to them after all, even if they couldn't voice it or give it a name. They certainly couldn't stop it.
Marek shook his head and waved his hands and said, "Alas, my dear, dear friends, I must of course decline that most singular of honors. My duties as khazark of the enclave, and the diplomatic status that post confers, would of course make it impossible for me to serve as your ransar. I do, however, offer my services to the next ransar, to the senate, and to the people of the fine city-state of Innarlith, so that I might advise and help in any way."
A less enthusiastic round of applause followed, and Marek, ever taking the pulse of those around him, knew that the senators were tiring of speeches. Though more was said, Marek pressured in ways both magical and mundane to move the proceedings along, once more without a vote, and when the congress was finally drawn to a close, he took a deep breath and tried not to feel as though he'd made a narrow escape.
The junior senators made their way out of the chamber first, and Marek was held back by a veritable mob of
well-wishers and sycophants, led by Asheru. They made their way slowly along the aisle, Marek telling them all what they wanted to hear, and the mob returning the favor threefold. Only when they passed through the outer doors did the senators disperse, wandering off in groups of half a dozen or less.
When he'd entered there had been a pair of black firedrakes guarding the doors—fully a third of the remaining creatures after Pristoleph's wemics, and so long without a ransar to follow, had killed or scattered the bulk of them. But they were gone.
Marek took a deep breath of fresh air and fought back a nettling feeling—the inescapable sensation that he was being watched. His attention was drawn to one of the many reflecting pools that dotted the gardens surrounding the Chamber of Law and Civility.
A bird unlike any he'd ever seen stood ankle-deep in the thin layer of water. A sort of crane, Marek guessed. It stood on legs like twigs, a foot and a half tall. Its long, sinuous neck was twice that length, and

its red-accented head was tipped by a needle-like beak. The bird's eyes found Marek's and the Thayan detected a sparkle of intelligence that should not have been there.
He looked behind him, then to one side, and began to cast a spell that would spirit him away to the safety of the enclave. A wemic burst from a concealing hedgerow and leveled a spear at Aikiko, who let rip a shrill, girlish scream unbefitting of a senator.
Marek opened his mouth and uttered only the first syllable of his spell when a kick to his head shook him, blew the spell from his mind and left the casting ruined, and staggered him.
He turned as quickly as his considerable girth would allow and had just barely enough time to take in the creature that stood behind him. It was as though the crane had somehow melded with a man. Its head was the same red-marked, beaked head of a bird, the eyes sparkling with
more than intelligence. Marek saw a fierce humor there, and a sort of gloating that made his face flush. The rest of the creature's body was human—wings replaced with long, graceful arms, the sticklike legs fuller and too long for a normal man. One of those legs seemed to twitch, the bird-man leaped a foot into the air, and the leg swept around. The creature's foot smashed into Marek's right temple and darkness enveloped him as he thought, The Shou... ?
77_
17 Eleasias, the Year ofLightning Storms (1374 DR) The Palace of Many Spires, Innarlith
Though Pristoleph disliked the Palace of Many Spires, he understood the significance of conducting the audience to follow in the ransar's traditional seat. He'd also had the conspirators housed in the dungeons below the palace, so it was convenient for all present to meet there, and it didn't hurt to show the various foreign dignitaries that he was the palace's—and hence the city's—rightful lord.
He'd hand-picked the dungeon guards himself, pulling the chief jailer from the upper ranks of the city watch. The watch commander had lost his entire family—a wife and three adult daughters—when the black firedrakes tore indiscriminately through his Third Quarter neighborhood in search of Pristoleph. Though the man might have at least partially blamed the ransar for that turn of events, when he found that his wife and daughters had been animated and enslaved as zombie workers in a tannery, his outrage brought him to Pristoleph's side.
It was that man who opened the side door to the audience chamber and scowled at each of the seven conspirators as they were escorted into the room in shackles. Rymiit, Kurtsson, and Asheru were gagged to prevent them from casting spells. Nyla, Sitre, Aikiko, and Meykhati

looked thin, pale, and utterly beaten from their short stay in the dungeon. All seven wore the drab, tattered shifts of prisoners, and they reeked of their own filth. They looked at Pristoleph with varying degrees of hatred, anger, fear, and desperation. He ignored them all, save the Thayan.

If Marek Rymiit had been able to move his hands or speak, he would surely have burned the palace down, taking even his co-conspirators into the inferno. The anger that smoldered in the rotund, haggard foreigner came off him in waves not unlike the heat that Pristoleph's genasi blood produced when he was in a similar state. Pristoleph gave the Thayan a smug curl of his lips—the only honor he'd offer the Red Wizard that day or ever again. The Thayan's eyes only smoldered more.

Behind the line of prisoners, sitting in orderly rows and dressed in their very finest, were the remaining senators, all cowed and quiet, all studiously examining the floor tiles or ceiling beams rather than catch the eyes of their former leaders.

"Before we begin, I would like to introduce to the gathered senators our noble visitors from abroad, here to observe Innarlith in the twilight of its lowest point and the dawn of its rebirth," Pristoleph said from the raised dais. He stood next to an ornamental throne, but never felt right sitting in it. He gestured to the people who sat in the front row, behind the prisoners. "May I present Miss Ran Ai Yu and Master Lau Cheung Fen of Shou Lung—" the two celestials, the male Pristoleph had come to know as a hengeyokai, stood and bowed —"Warden of the Port Ayesunder Truesilver of Cormyr—" who nodded but didn't stand—"and Hrothgar Deepcarver of the Great Rift."

The dwarf looked surprised at having been introduced and ended up waving, unsure of the protocol. Pristoleph smiled at him and went on.

"We are here today to once and for all have done with the conspirators who nearly destroyed the city-state we call home. They know the charges against them, as do you all. They meet our justice in one of two ways: exile or death."

The air in the room grew heavy and still. Pristoleph stood scanning the faces of the senators, noting who would look back at him and who wouldn't.

"With the exception of the mages," Pristoleph said, "they will be allowed to speak."

"This is an outrage!" Aikiko shrieked. "You ... all of you ... you cannot let this stand! You cannot surrender to this genasi scum, this inhuman freak that holds court with a Shou witch and her lycanthropic master, or another Cormyrean—as though we haven't had enough of the infant king's meddling in our affairs—not to mention a stinking, low-life dwarf crawled up from under a rock to—"

She was interrupted by Hrothgar, who bellowed out the heartiest laugh Pristoleph had ever heard, one he couldn't help but join. Aikiko boiled with self-aggrandizing rage.
"Stop it!" she shrieked. "Stop this at once!"
Pristoleph put up a calming hand and stopped laughing. Hrothgar followed suit, but not before he shot Aikiko a look as full of murder as it was full of mirth.
"And what of you, Aikiko?" Pristoleph said. "Are you not also of Shou blood? Your features betray that."
Aikiko gasped as though she'd been impaled with a crossbow bolt. "No Shou blood poisons my veins."
"With permission, Ransar," Ran Ai Yu said, standing and bowing. Pristoleph nodded back with a smile. "This woman is correct, Ransar. She is Kozakuran, not Shou."
"I stand corrected, Miss Ran, thank you," Pristoleph replied.
"This is madness," Sitre gasped, and it seemed to Pristoleph as though the man had only just then awakened from a deep sleep. "I cannot be held to account with these people. I only served Innarlith. They lied to me. They told me what to do and what to say. Ransar, please, I beg your mercy!"
But Pristoleph knew better, and had none of that to spare. Instead he looked to Meykhati and said, "And you? What do you have to say for yourself?"
Meykhati looked him in the eye, but there was no defiance left in him. "I have distant relations in Cimbar. I will go there."
"Aikiko?" Pristoleph asked.
"You will address me as Senator Aikiko, pretender," she spat.
"Kozakura," Pristoleph asked, otherwise ignoring her, "or death?"
She spat on the floor in front of her.
"Senator Aikiko," Pristoleph told the jailer, "has chosen to die for her crimes."
Screaming obscenities in at least three languages, Aikiko was dragged from the room. The sight of it made Sitre crumble to the ground, sobbing. Tears streamed down Asheru's face as well.
"Save me, Ransar," Sitre begged. "Send me to Cimbar with Meykhati."
Pristoleph looked at Meykhati, who shrugged as though he couldn't care less either way.
"Done," Pristoleph said, ignoring the groveling thanks of the blubbering criminal.
Meykhati and Sitre were dragged from the chamber.
"Nyla?" Pristoleph said, letting his attention fall on the woman he'd known perhaps longest of all.
"You know full well you'll have to kill me, Pristoleph," the woman sneered. Her eye patch had been stripped from her and the scarred

ruin of her right eye made Pristoleph wince. "I won't be your whore again, and I won't willingly step aside from all I've built here."
"That pains me, Nyla," Pristoleph said, losing a brief struggle to keep his thoughts inside. "We're not unalike, you and me."
"No," she said, "I suppose not. I was a whore once, and now you are one—a whore to the drooling toddler monarch of Cormyr." She tossed her head back in the direction of Ayesunder Truesilver. "Who is this, now? Your new master? The purple-headed hag not to your tastes?"
"Ambassador Harriman," Truesilver said, and Pristoleph could see Nyla's skin crawl at the sound of his deep, calm voice, "has been recalled to Cormyr to answer to the Crown's justice. The Steel Regent has asked that I attend to our embassy in Innarlith until such time as a suitable replacement can be sent. I assure you, your ransar takes no orders from the King of Cormyr, who, you might be interested to know, stopped drooling a year ago."
Pristoleph had never heard so uncomfortable a smattering of laughter as followed that, but his own smile was genuine when he turned it on the Cormyrean.
"Be that as it may," Nyla went on, "I must demand that Mast—that Khazark Rymiit, be allowed to speak in his own defense. Or are you that afraid of him?"
"I'm that afraid of him," Pristoleph said, holding her one-eyed stare. "Senator Nyla has chosen to be executed."
Nyla spat on the floor as she was pulled from the room.
"And as for the three of you," Pristoleph said to the gagged and bound mages. "You will be returned to the realm of Thay with a formal missive from my own hand, detailing the extraordinary actions you've taken to undermine the sovereignty of the city-state that took you in and showed you nothing but hospitality and trust that we now know was sorely misplaced. I remand you to whatever justice awaits you there."
Marek tipped his head in a defiant bow that was so smug Pristoleph had to restrain himself from leaping from the dais and beating the Thayan down. Asheru muttered some kind of protest from behind his gag—he wasn't Thayan after all—but Pristoleph paid him no heed.
"And Rymiit," Pristoleph said as the last three conspirators were being dragged from the room in their chains, "if you ever darken a single doorway in my city ever again, I will burn you where you stand."
Marek shrugged and Pristoleph tilted his head to the guard who pushed the Thayan through the door and on to the hands of the zulkirs.
78
26 Eleasias, the Yearof Lightning Storms (1374 DR) Along the Banks of the Nagaflow

IPhyrea knelt on the muddy riverbank, her simple dress pulled up over her knees to keep it out of the mud. She dipped a hand into the cool water and traced a slow circle with the tip of a finger. Her reflection wavered and broke apart.

"You don't like what you see?" Ivar Devorast said from behind her.

She looked back at the water, which had already begun to calm. There she saw both herself and Devorast. She smiled and was surprised by the way her face looked. She couldn't remember the last time she'd looked at her own reflection and seen herself smile, but she didn't try to remember. It didn't matter.

"I do," she said to his reflection. "I like what I see very much."

He smiled and shrugged and walked downriver a few steps. She watched his reflection in the water as long as she could, then she looked down at her legs. The end of a thin white scar was visible on her thigh and she touched it with her wet hand. The water was cold on her skin and she shivered, though the day was warm and the sun bright.

She knew she would carry those little scars with her forever, but she also knew that there would be no more of them. Phyrea wasn't conscious of having made that decision, any more than she'd been conscious of making a decision to cut herself in the first place. She just didn't want to anymore.

Looking out over the slow-moving river, the sun sparkling from its surface, Phyrea felt safer than she ever had in her life, and it wasn't just the imposing bulk of the Nagaflow Keep that rose behind her—the citadel that had

been her home since that terrible night in the storm—and it wasn't because Ivar Devorast was there with her. She felt safe from herself.

So content was she that at first she didn't see the thing rise from the sun-dappled water. Phyrea blinked to clear the sun from her eyes then gasped and scuttled backward, dragging her dress in the mud. Devorast came to her side with a few fast, heavy strides, and by then Phyrea could see the thing's face—stern and cold, but the face of a human. It rose on a neck that was too long, and Phyrea realized that no shoulders would ever break the water's surface.

"Svayyah," Devorast said.

The naga.

Phyrea took a deep breath and put a hand to her chest. Her heart hammered and adrenaline coursed through her veins, but still she smiled.

"Greetings, Senthissa'ssa," the naga hissed. She blinked at Phyrea, who nodded in response. "We are pleased that you appear well."

"Thank you, Svayyah," Devorast said.

Phyrea stood and brushed the mud from her dress. She looked at

Devorast and her breath stopped in her throat. Behind him, formed of violet light, stood the form of her father.
"Is this human well?" Svayyah asked, but Phyrea paid her no mind.
Go home, Phyrea, Inthelph said with a gentle smile—a smile she'd only rarely seen when he was alive, a smile she wished she'd seen more often. It's safe.
"Phyrea?" Devorast asked. He touched her elbow, which startled her, and when she blinked her father was gone.
"And he won't be back," she whispered.
"Phyrea?" Devorast said.
She looked at him and smiled, and shook her head. "None of them are coming back," she told him, and he seemed to understand her—though how could he, really?
"This human has lived for a time in more than this world," Svayyah observed. "Some among the naja'ssara would consider this one blessed indeed."
Phyrea looked at the naga and said, "Thank you."
The naga lifted one eyebrow and turned her attention back to Devorast. "It is fortunate that Ssa'Naja has found you. We wish to ask —will the canal be rebuilt? Will it be finished?"
"Yes," Devorast said without the briefest moment's hesitation. "Yes, it will be."
The naga sort of bowed to one side in what Phyrea took to be a shrug. "Very well then," she said. "The agreement between us stands as before."
"Thank you," he said, and the naga sank beneath the surface with a smile that made Phyrea shudder.
"It's time," Phyrea said. "It's time to go home."
"Is it?" he asked. "You've received a message from Pristoleph?"
"No," she said with a smile, turning her face into the warm wind, "but it's time to go back."
79_
7 Eleint, the Yearof Lightning Storms (1374 DR) Pristal Towers, Innarlith
Iristoleph smoothed his already smooth tunic with hands that didn't shake so much as vibrate. He pressed his teeth together, then relaxed his jaw. He folded his arms in front of his chest, then let them hang limp at his side. He sat, briefly, on one of the antique Mulhorandi folding chairs then stood. He paced for a few steps then stopped at the opposite end of the parlor from the door. Then he crossed to the fireplace and leaned with one elbow on the mantle. His nervous proximity made the fire flare white so he stepped away, sensitive to the comfort of the guests that he'd been told had arrived.
The ransar still hadn't settled on where or how he should stand when

the door opened and Ran Ai Yu stepped in. Pristoleph smiled at the Shou woman, as had become his habit, and she smiled back then held the door open and bowed.
"Ransar," she said, her accent tickling Pristoleph's ears in a way that delighted him only until Phyrea stepped into the room, "may I present your wife, the Mistress Phyrea, and the Master Builder of Innarlith, Ivar Devorast."
Phyrea nodded to the Shou woman and smiled at Pristoleph. She stepped into the room with a foreshortened, almost timid gate. The way she looked made his skin grow warm, but the way she looked at him cooled him until he almost shivered. The smile they shared stayed warm throughout, though, and he could feel a certain understanding pass between them.
"I've told you before," Ivar Devorast said, breaking that connection and pulling Pristoleph's attention to him with the crystalline confidence of his voice, "how I feel about that title."
"A jest, then," Pristoleph said, extending his hand to the one man he could truly call a friend. "Call yourself 'foreman,' 'chief ditch-digger,' or 'Lord of the Watercourse' for all I care."
Devorast put his hand in his and their grasp was warm, firm, and direct.
Turning to Ran Ai Yu, Devorast said, "Seeing you again pleases me as much as it surprises me, Miss Ran. I hope you'll be staying in Innarlith long enough for me to visit Jie Zud."
"You are welcome aboard her any time you wish, Master Devorast," she said, bowing once more, and her eyes darted to Pristoleph. "Circumstances shall keep me here for, I believe, some time to come."
"Ran Ai Yu has agreed to act as my seneschal," Pristoleph explained. He tried to keep from grinning like a schoolboy, especially when Phyrea's eyes widened and she
studied him with some confusion. "She will be staying on here, at Pristal Towers."
"It would please me greatly," the seneschal said, "if Jie Zud were to be the first ship to pass from the Lake of Steam to the Nagaflow without use of magecraft."
"Then I shall do my best to see that day finally arrive, Seneschal," Devorast said with a bow of his own.
"That's it, then," Pristoleph said. "You'll rebuild it? You'll finish it?"
"You'll pay for it?" asked Devorast.
With a laugh Pristoleph replied, "I've never withdrawn that offer. And for that, I will expect a work befitting my queen."
Devorast glanced at Phyrea and said, "It will be."
The air took on a density that made all four of them look at anything but the others in the room.

Finally, Pristoleph could stand it no more and said, "She was never mine, Ivar." He looked at Phyrea, who nodded to him, then wiped a tear from her cheek with the back of her hand. "She was no more mine than she will be yours."
Devorast nodded and he and Phyrea shared a glance.
"And she will have to share you," Pristoleph said with a smile that expressed both joy and sadness, "with a hole in the ground."
"And you?" Devorast said.
"Me?" the ransar answered, letting his gaze fall over the beautiful and mysterious woman from Shou Lung. "My only mistress will be Innarlith herself."
Ran Ai Yu smiled at him in a way that said she didn't believe him any more than he believed himself.
EPIIiOOUE
3Ches, the Year of Risen Elfkin (1375 DR) The City of Velen, Tethyr
Marek Rymiit found the dance as alien as the music that filled the air of the candlelit ballroom. He blinked at his dance partner in the dim light, a pretty but severe woman in her forties, who had very forwardly and in a manner that allowed no other alternative, demanded that he dance with her. Her dress was of a sort with the other members of the Tethyrian nobility—a fashion he would also need time to grow accustomed to.
"I must say, my dear," he said, having just then realized he didn't know the woman's name, "that these candles do you an injustice by hiding your features, which even in the darkness reveal themselves to be as handsome as they are noble. Perhaps I will be able to appeal to the master of the house"—a petty lord who's name Marek had already forgotten—"to allow me the opportunity to supply him with lighting of an enchanted—and more enchanting—sort."
"Save it, Rymiit,"the woman responded in the dialect of Mulhorandi spoken only on the windswept plateaus of Thay.
Marek's blood ran cold, and when he tried to pull away, the woman drew him closer. Her grip was stern and commanding, and she danced so close to him, taking the lead and spinning him in the coastal realm's whirling mockery of a formal dance. She was so close that Marek's
arms wrapped all the way around her thin frame. The hooks that his masters had given him in place of hands clanked together and sent electric spasms up his arms. He hated that sensation more even than the ruin his life had become. It was worse than pain, it was a reminder.
"Forgive me ... Khazark,"Marek whispered, his eyes darting to the woman's hairline, where the very edge of a tattoo was revealed from beneath her otherwise convincing wig.

"This isn't Innarlith," the khazark of the Thayan Enclave in Velen said, her breath almost painfully hot on his neck. "You will serve me, and you will stay out of the corridors of power. Serve me well and serve me long enough, and I might just have them give you your hands back."

Marek's throat closed and his knees began to shake.

"Yes, Khazark,"he said.

The woman whirled him away and they both came to a stop on the dance floor, the other guests continuing to circle them. She stared into his eyes with an arctic coldness, and Marek didn't know what to do with himself.

"This is the Lady Dumonde," she said in the common tongue.

Breathlessly delighted for the opportunity to do any- . thing but stand there like a first-year apprentice, Marek plastered his most charming smile on his face, and brought that sparkle to his eye. The young lady —she might have been all of nineteen—curtsied and stared at his hooks. At least one of the two things she'd done was polite.

"My lady," Marek said with a sweeping bow. "Please allow this humble, maimed soldier of the cause of justice the pleasure of your company for the remainder of this delightful melody."

The girl giggled and fell into Marek's embrace as though she couldn't wait to feel the cold metal of his hooks on her. He looked at the khazark, whose face remained stern and frosty, then turned his attention entirely to the girl.

"You have a charming accent," she said, batting her eyes
at him in a way that made him want to roll his. "Where are you from?"

"Ah, my dear, dear lady," Marek said, "I have come here from far, far away for one reason and one reason only, and that is to make your most gracious and alluring acquaintance."

She giggled again and as they danced, Marek thought of at least a dozen ways to kill her, and her whole family, with but a few arcane phrases.